

Still Ours to Lose: Afghanistan on the Brink

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Barnett R. Rubin, author of the Council on Foreign Relation Special Report, "Afghanistan's Uncertain Transition from Turmoil to Normalcy" (CSR no. 12, March 2006) visited Afghanistan from July 29 to August 8, in order to evaluate trends since the publication of that report. This update, based on interviews and other information collected during that trip and since then, provides his assessment of the current situation in Afghanistan. CIC's research on Afghanistan is supported by grants from the Open Society Institute and the governments of Norway and the UK, but all views are those of the author, not of these donors or of the Council on Foreign Relations.

“The pyramid of Afghanistan government’s legitimacy should not be brought down due to our inefficiency in knowing the enemy, knowing ourselves and applying resources effectively.”

Saleh, 2006.¹

In the past six months, a number of events have raised the stakes in Afghanistan and further threatened the international effort there. The handover of command from the US-led coalition to NATO means that Afghanistan is now not only the first battleground of the so-called “War on Terror,” but a testing ground for the future of the Atlantic alliance. The Taliban-led insurgency based in Pakistan has shown new capabilities in the south and east, challenging both the US and NATO, while suicide bombings, unknown in Afghanistan before their successful use by the Iraqi insurgents, have sown terror in Kabul and other areas as well.² A particularly daring attack on a Coalition convoy killed 16 people, including two US soldiers, close to the US embassy in one of the most heavily defended areas of Kabul on September 8.

On May 29th in Kabul an accidental crash of a US military vehicle that killed an Afghan sparked a riot in which 17 people were killed. Rioters, who chanted slogans against the US, President Karzai, and foreigners in general, attacked NGOs, diplomatic residences, brothels, hotels and restaurants where they thought alcohol was served, media offices, businesses, and the parliament. These riots exposed the incapacity of the police, many of whom disappeared, and the vulnerability of the government to mass violence, even in the capital. This event exacerbated ethno-factional tensions within the governing elite, as the President accused opposition leaders of exploiting acts of violence by demonstrators largely from Panjsher, home of the leading group of the Northern Alliance, charges that Panjsheri leaders denied.³ The riots showed violent opposition to the government and the US not from the Taliban but also from members a group that had led the resistance to the Taliban.

With many trends pointing in the wrong direction, it is time to rethink strategy and significantly increase both the level of resources available and the effectiveness of their use. As the largest troop contributor and aid donor, the US has to lead this transformation. For decades US policy makers of all administrations, however, have underestimated the stakes for the US and the world in Afghanistan, and they continue to do so today.

¹ A. Saleh, *Strategy of Insurgents and Terrorists in Afghanistan*, National Directorate of Security, Kabul Afghanistan, May 2006. I obtained a copy of this document from a U.S. source in Washington, D.C.

² Hekmat Karzai and Seth Jones, “How to curb suicide terrorism in Afghanistan,” *Christian Science Monitor*, July 18, 2006.

³ The accident occurred in Khairkhana, an area of Kabul largely populated by Tajiks from regions north of the capital.

Contrary to the analysis of the Bush administration, whose response to September 11 wandered off to Iraq and dreams of a “New Middle East,” the main center of global terrorism is in Pakistan, especially the Pakistan-Afghanistan border region. In the words of one military commander, “Until we transform the tribal belt, the US is at risk.” Far from achieving this objective, in 2001 the US-led coalition pushed the core leadership of al-Qaida and the Taliban out of Afghanistan into Pakistan without a strategy for consolidating this tactical victory. Thereafter, while the Bush administration focused on unrelated or overblown threats elsewhere, it failed to provide those Taliban who did not want to fight for al-Qaida with a way back to Afghanistan, instead adopting a policy of incommunicado detention in Guantánamo, Bagram, and “black sites,” making refuge in Pakistan a more attractive option. Drawing in part on such fugitives and in part on newly minted recruits from militant madrasas and training camps that continued to operate without impediment, the Taliban reconstituted their command structure, recruitment networks, and support bases in Pakistan, while Afghans waited in vain for the major reconstruction effort they expected to build their state and improve their lives. As a result, a cross-border insurgency is now exploiting the weaknesses of an impoverished society and an ineffective government to threaten the achievements of the last five years.

The frustration of those on the ground is palpable.

A Western diplomat who has been in Afghanistan for three years opened our meeting with an outburst: “I have never been so depressed. The insurgency is triumphant,” he said, accusing the US and the entire international community in Afghanistan of “appeasement” of Pakistan, from where Taliban leaders direct the insurgency and terrorist attacks. “Things are looking very dark,” wrote an Afghan-American woman who is risking her life working in one of the most dangerous areas of Southern Afghanistan, where the burgeoning opium trade supports insurgency, criminality, and lawlessness. An elder from Kunar Province in Eastern Afghanistan said that government efforts against the insurgency are weak because communities will not share information with the authorities: “The people don’t trust any of the people in government offices.” An unemployed engineer who lives in Kabul and an elder from the northern province of Baghlan echoed the sentiment: “The people have totally lost trust in the government,” said the former; “the people have no hope for this government now,” said the latter. “There is a big distance between the current system and Islamic virtues,” said an elder from Paktia in Eastern Afghanistan, citing the bribery of judges.⁴

A former minister, now a leader in the parliament, commented, “The conditions in Afghanistan are ripe for fundamentalism. Our situation was not resolved before Iraq started. Iraq has not been resolved, and now there is fighting in Palestine and Lebanon. Then maybe Iran. . . . We pay the price for all of it.” “So many people have left the country recently,” recounted a UN official, “that the government has run out of passports.” An elder from the southern province of Uruzgan, who had sheltered Hamid Karzai when he was working underground against the Taliban, told how he was later

⁴ I would like to thank Hamed Wardak for organizing meetings with elders through his movement, Fidayin-i Sulh (Sacrificers for Peace). Wardak did not attend the meetings and bears no responsibility for the views expressed.

arrested by Americans who placed a hood on his head, whisked him away, and then released him. He shrugged off the indignity: "I understand that in this country if you do good, you will receive evil in return. This is our tradition." He added, however, "What we have realized is that the foreigners are not really helping us. We think that the foreigners do not want Afghanistan to be rebuilt."

Yet no one advocated giving up. The same elders who expressed frustration with the corruption of the government and its distance from the people also said, "We have been with the Taliban and have seen their cruelty. People don't want them back." Fruit traders from Qandahar who complained that "The Taliban beat us and ask for food, and then the government beats us for helping the Taliban," also said that President Karzai was the country's best leader in thirty years – a modest endorsement, given the competition, but still significant. One military leader opined, "My working assumption is that the international community needs to double its resources. We can't do it on the margins. We have no hedge against domestic and regional counter-forces." But, he concluded, "It's still ours to lose."

Intensified Threats

With access to a safe haven for its leadership, training, supplies, funding, and recruitment in Pakistan, with additional funding from Arab donors in the Persian Gulf, the Taliban-led insurgency has increased its effectiveness and both broadened and deepened its presence. The government and international forces have prevailed in virtually all tactical engagements. The weakness of the government and the reconstruction effort, however, has often prevented consolidation of tactical gains, while the failure to deny the insurgency its safe haven in Pakistan has blocked strategic victory. The invasion of Iraq under false premises and the US's unstinting support for Israel's staggering reprisals against Lebanon have handed the insurgency additional propaganda victories, further weakening the US's allies in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. The increased tempo of suicide bombings and attacks on school buildings even outside the insurgency's main area of operation has spread insecurity into Kabul itself. One suicide bomber was stopped in Kabul by police during my visit; and a major attack on September 8 killed 16 people in the most secure area of the city. .

The Taliban's recent offensives were partly responses to changes initiated by the international forces. The US-led Coalition has handed off command of the southern region of Afghanistan to NATO, which was already in charge in the north and west. The NATO force has deployed to areas, notably Helmand province, where the Coalition had neither ousted the Taliban nor made substantive efforts to stem the drug trade (Helmand now produces about half of the world's total supply of opium). The Taliban offensives in the south have aimed to press public opinion in the principal non-US NATO troop contributing countries (the UK, Canada, and the Netherlands) to force a withdrawal. This is NATO's first military operation, the success of which is essential to the future of the alliance; as one US official put it, "The failure of NATO in Afghanistan is not an option."

The Taliban have increased the size of their units, their maneuverability, and their intelligence capabilities to establish a large and resilient presence in the rural areas of the south. The resiliency of their presence, the effectiveness of some of their institutions, and

their ruthless retribution against those charged with collaboration has neutralized much of the population. They have established a parallel administration in some areas and they occasionally take control outlying districts. Though some of their officials (such as provincial governors) are based in Pakistan, people are increasingly patronizing Taliban courts, seen as more effective and fair than the corrupt official system.

International military officials in Afghanistan state that intelligence confirms that the Pakistani Directorate of Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI) is providing aid to the Quetta shura (council), the main center of Taliban strategic command and control in Southern Afghanistan. Quetta is the capital of the province of Baluchistan, where Pakistani military dealt a blow to a Baluch ethnic nationalist insurgency and killed one of its key political leaders, the 79-year-old former Governor Nawab Akbar Bugti, while leaving the Taliban command center untouched.

In Kabul on September 7, General Musharraf virtually admitted these charges. According to the New York Times:

General Musharraf said that his government had rounded up Al Qaeda supporters in Pakistan's cities and had pursued foreign fighters in the frontier tribal areas, but he said the focus has now shifted to dealing with the Taliban. . . . "We have to see where their command structure is, who is their commander and we must destroy the command structure," [said General Musharraf].⁵

Another Taliban shura, directing operations in eastern Afghanistan, is based in the Pakistani tribal agencies of North and South Waziristan. It has consolidated its alliance with Pakistani Taliban, as well as foreign jihadi fighters from Uzbekistan and elsewhere. Just one day before Musharraf's statement in Kabul, Pakistani authorities signed a peace deal with the local Taliban in North Waziristan. The Taliban are expected not to cross over into Afghanistan to attack US and Afghan forces and refrain from killing local tribal leaders, while the foreign militants (Uzbeks, Chechens, and Arabs affiliated with al-Qaida) are expected to either live peacefully or leave the region in peace. Within hours of the signing ceremony a legislator from the region told media that there never were any foreign militants in the region. In neighboring South Waziristan tribal district similar peace deals in 2004 empowered the Taliban to the extent that they now control the region. The agreement was widely perceived as a confession of failure by the Pakistani military that conceded the Taliban a haven in return for a face-saving agreement that will not be implemented.

Further north, veteran Islamist leader Gulbuddin Hikmatyar, a favorite of the ISI since 1973, operates from Peshawar and the Bajaur and Momand tribal agencies adjacent to northeast Afghanistan.

The insurgency cannot be explained solely by its sanctuary in Pakistan, but few insurgencies with safe havens abroad have ever been defeated.⁶ While bad governance

⁵ Carlotta Gall, "Pakistani Leader Admits Taliban Cross into Afghanistan," New York Times, September 7, 2006.

⁶ Seth Jones, Averting failure in Afghanistan, Survival, Spring 2006.

and corruption are indeed rampant in southern and eastern Afghanistan, conditions are no better in northern and western Afghanistan, where poverty, narcotics, corruption, and criminality have bred insecurity and violent clashes over resources, but not an anti-government insurgency.

While ending foreign sanctuary for the Taliban is necessary, it will not be sufficient to stabilize Afghanistan. The state and economy need urgent reform and assistance. While no statistics are available, people in Kabul and throughout the country complain that crime is increasing, and that the police are the main criminals. The formation of the Afghan National Army, a professional force now approaching 35,000 men, has been one of the success stories of the past five years. One reason for the army's professionalism has been that nearly all infantry are fresh recruits. Many of the over 60,000 men who have been demobilized from militias have joined the police, private security firms, or organized crime, and sometimes all three. One former mujahidin commander who became a general in the ministry of the interior is widely reported (including by his former mujahidin colleagues) to be a major figure in organized crime, who was responsible for the murder of a cabinet minister in February 2002. He is also a partner in the local branch of a US-based firm, which provides many international offices with security guards, most of them fighters from this commander's militia and subsequently his employees in the Ministry of the Interior.

Researchers on narcotics trafficking report that, as commanders demobilized from the ministry of defense have found positions in the ministry of the interior, the latter became the main body providing protection to drug traffickers. Positions as police chief in poppy-producing district are sold to the highest bidder; the going rate was reported to be \$100,000 for a six-month appointment to a position with a salary of \$60 per month.

Such a corrupt police force, which also lacks training and basic equipment (batons, tear gas, water cannon, plastic shields, secure communications) utterly failed when confronted with a few hundred rioters. In combination with his continuing contention with the chairman of the lower house of parliament, Muhammad Yunus Qanuni, a major figure from the leading faction of the Northern Alliance whom the President Karzai suspected of exploiting the riots, the President appointed members of a rival Northern Alliance group to key police positions, including police chief of Kabul.⁷ In order to do so the president overrode the ranking of candidates based on merit that the new process of MOI reform required for high-level police appointees. He did so with the assent of US officials, who claim that they needed to gain approval of others on the list in order to improve security in insurgency-affected areas of the south and that they lacked information on the new appointees. President Karzai argues that he is forced into such unpalatable balancing acts because the international community failed for years to respond to his requests for adequate resources for the police. Whatever the reasons, many Afghans interpret the appointment of Amanullah Guzar as police chief of Kabul

⁷ Some of the rioters, who appeared to be mainly from Panjsher, carried pictures of the late Ahmed Shah Massoud and chanted anti-Karzai slogans. Qanuni firmly denies any involvement and states that the rioters also tried to attack the parliament. The new appointees, while previously allied with Massoud, came from the Shamali plain between Panjsher and Kabul and assured Karzai of their loyalty during the riots.

and Basir Salangi as police commander of Nangarhar as placing organized crime in charge of both the security of Kabul and the capital's key supply route from Pakistan.

Afghan traders and elders reported several kidnappings of rich businessmen or their sons, in some cases leading to the payment of large ransoms and in other cases ending in the murder of the captive. Most report that the kidnappers wore police uniforms and used vehicles with blackened windows like those used by officials. On August 24 robbers wearing police uniforms robbed a bank van of \$60,000 in cash within easy walking distance of the MOI headquarters in Central Kabul. Such incidents have led to the departure of Afghan investors, contributing to an economic slowdown that is aggravating unemployment and discontent.

One difference between Iraq and Afghanistan has been that, while Iraq has suffered an economic collapse as a result of the US invasion, Afghanistan averaged real non-drug annual growth rates over 15 percent. The country was so poor (the world's poorest country outside of sub-Saharan Africa) that the expenditures of foreign forces and organizations combined with the end of a drought, a relatively small amount of aid, and narcotics profits could power a recovery from a 23-year war.

But as a World Bank official put it, "It has not been reliable, sustainable growth." Afghans emphasized how unemployment feeds conflict: "Those Afghans who are fighting, it is all because of unemployment," said a fruit trader from Qandahar. And this year the bubble economy has been punctured. Real estate prices and rents are dropping in Kabul, and occupancy rates are down. Fruit and vegetable sellers report a decline in demand of about 20 percent. Construction workers and members of the building trades in Kabul reported a decline in employment, leading to a drop in wages by about 20 percent. A drought in some parts of the country has also led to displacement and a decline in agricultural employment, for which the record opium poppy crop only partially compensated.

A major economic issue that is aggravating relations between Afghans and the international community is the supply of electricity to Kabul. In the past five years no major power projects have been completed. A plan to bring power to Kabul from Central Asia is two to three years from completion. As the city's population expands toward five million (up from 2.3 million five years ago), Kabulis today have less electricity than they did five years ago. While foreigners and the rich power air conditioners, hot water heaters, high-speed internet, and satellite TV with private generators, average Kabulis are now ending a summer without fans, and fearing a winter without heaters.

For the past two years, Kabul got through the winter with power supplied by diesel generators, whose fuel was purchased by the US. This year the US made no such allocation, claiming that Afghanistan did not ask for it. Regardless of who is at fault, without the purchase of diesel Kabul will have even less power in the next two years than in the past.

The narcotics economy, however, is booming. According to the UN Office of Drugs and Crime (UNODC), production of opium poppy with a record crop of 6,100 metric tons this

year surpassed last year's by 49 percent, overtaking the previous record crop of 1999, before the Taliban ban.⁸ This massive increase in production belies the claims of progress made on the basis of a five percent decrease last year. The Taliban exploited the counter-productive policy of crop eradication pressed on an unwilling Afghan government by the US. They gained the support of farmers in Helmand and elsewhere by providing protection against eradication. As I have argued elsewhere, eradication before significant economic development is ineffective and counter-productive.⁹ While the Taliban protect small farmers and sharecroppers from eradication, not a single high government official has been prosecuted for drug-related corruption, though many known traffickers occupy high office.

Recommendations

For several years the US responded to President Karzai's repeated warnings about the Taliban's sanctuary in Pakistan by assuring him that Pakistan was cooperating, that public statements were counter-productive, and that the US would soon take care of the problem. Assurances that the US would soon mop up the "remnants" of the Taliban and al-Qa'ida have proved false. Nor did the US or others respond with adequate resources or programs to strengthen the Afghan state and its relations to the communities in a way that would make Afghanistan more resistant to the Taliban. President Karzai's strategy of temporizing with corrupt and abusive power-holders has also weakened the state building effort, but he claims he has had inadequate support and resources to undertake a stronger policy. New approaches and more resources are required on both fronts.

Ending Sanctuary in Pakistan

Western and Afghan officials differ over the extent to which Pakistan's aid to the Taliban is ordered or tolerated by the highest levels of the military, but they have reached a consensus, in the words of one senior military leader, that Pakistani leaders "could disrupt the senior levels of [Taliban] command and control," but that they do not do so. President Musharraf virtually admitted in Kabul that they had not even tried. Disruption of command and control is the key to strategic victory, not control over infiltration, a tactical issue to which Pakistan consistently tries to divert discussion. A recent agreement by Afghanistan and Pakistan to conduct joint patrols on the Durand Line (which Afghanistan does not recognize as a border) to combat infiltration may help build the relationship, but it will not end the sanctuary in Pakistan.¹⁰

The failure by Pakistan even to try to disrupt the Taliban's command and control in Quetta is a major threat to international peace and security. But pressure to stop these activities is not enough. The Pakistani military's alliance with Islamist militant groups is a response to perceived threats, a way of managing an outmoded border regime, and the basis of the domestic legitimacy of the state.

⁸ Carlotta Gall, "Opium harvest at record level in Afghanistan," New York Times, September 2, 2006.

⁹ Barnett R. Rubin, Road to Ruin – Afghanistan's booming opium industry, Center on International Cooperation and Center for American Progress, October 7, 2004

¹⁰ Ron Synovitz, "Afghanistan: U.S. Reports 'Breakthrough' On Afghan-Pakistan Security Cooperation," RFE/RL, August 25, 2006.

To confront the immediate threat requires serious pressure. The first condition for serious pressure is to convey a consistent message. There is no need to berate Pakistan in public, but US officials should at least stop congratulating Islamabad for something it has not done. CENTCOM Combatant Commander General John Abizaid, for instance, stated in Kabul on August 27 that he "absolutely does not believe" that Pakistan is helping the Taliban.¹¹

Efforts are already under way by the four troop contributors in Southern Afghanistan (the US, UK, the Netherlands, and Canada) and by NATO as a whole to devise a common démarche. This effort should be expanded to include Russia and China as well. The central message of this démarche should be that failure to take forceful action against the Taliban command in Baluchistan – at least as strong as the action taken against the Baluch ethnic insurgency, which led to the killing of former Governor Nawab Akbar Bugti – constitutes a threat to international peace and security as defined in the UN Charter. Pakistan, whose leaders seek parity with their rival, India, in part by acting as a full participant in the international community through contributions to UN peacekeeping operations and the fight against al-Qa'ida, will seek to avoid such a designation, with the various consequences that might flow from it. Pakistan should not benefit from US military assistance and international aid and debt relief while it fails even to try to dismantle the command structure of the Taliban.

Threats, explicit or implicit, are not enough. A realistic assessment of Pakistan's role does not require moving Pakistan from the "with us" to the "against us" column in the War on Terror account books, but recognizing that Pakistan's policy derives from its leaders' perceptions, interests, and capabilities, not from ours. The haven and support the Taliban receive in Pakistan derive in part from the hostility that has characterized relations between Pakistan and Afghanistan for as long as both have existed. That hostility, in turn, is partly driven by century-long grievances of Afghanistan, the threat that Pakistan perceives from India, and the precarious nature of Pakistan's national unity, especially the dissidence of the Pashtun and Baluch, which Afghanistan has often supported.¹²

The unified front that all major powers must show to Pakistan in opposition to its harboring of the Taliban command centers must be matched by offers to recognize the country's international status in return for accountability for past nuclear proliferation, and to address its conflicts with its neighbors. The US, NATO, and others should encourage the Afghan government to initiate a dialogue over the domestically sensitive issue of recognition of the Durand Line between the countries as a border, in return for secure trade and transport corridors to Pakistani ports. Transforming the border region into a frontier of cooperation rather than conflict will require political reforms and development efforts in the tribal territories, which will require further assistance, but, to repeat one U.S. senior leader's words, "Until we transform the tribal belt, the US is at

¹¹ Fisnik Abrashi, "Abizaid; Pakistan not aiding Taliban," The Associated Press, August 27, 2006.

¹² Rubin and Siddique, "Ending the Afghanistan-Pakistan Stalemate," USIP Special Report, September 2006.

risk.” The US should also weigh in with India and Afghanistan to assure that they make extra efforts to assure Pakistan that their bilateral relations will not threaten Islamabad.

Such a shift in US policy toward Pakistan requires a transformation from supporting President Musharraf to supporting democracy. Pakistan’s people have shown in all national elections that they support centrist parties, not the Islamist parties on which the military has relied. The killing of Nawab Akbar Bugti by the army has sparked revulsion throughout the political spectrum, weakening the military’s position and strengthening calls within Pakistan to resolve internal and external disputes through political means, rather than violence. The reassertion of the civilian political center, as well as of Pakistan’s business class, which is profiting from the reconstruction of Afghanistan, provides an opportunity to move beyond the US’s history of reliance on military rulers toward a more stable relationship with a Pakistani nation moving toward peace with its neighbors and with itself.

Strengthening the State

Creating a reasonably effective state in Afghanistan is a long-term project that will also require an end to major armed conflict, economic development, and the gradual replacement of narcotics by other economic activities. Recent crises, however, have exposed internal weaknesses that require both long-term programs and transitional measures.

The two fatal weak points in Afghanistan’s government today are the Ministry of the Interior and the judiciary. Both are pervaded by corruption and lack basic skills, equipment, and resources. Without effective and honest administrators, police, or judges, the state can do little to provide internal security.

Within the last year Coalition military forces have devised a plan for the thoroughgoing reform of the MOI. The Coalition estimates that this plan is three years behind the similar program for the Ministry of Defense, and that it will take at least a year before Afghans see any effects on the ground.

In Afghanistan the president and minister of interior appoint all administrative and police officials throughout the country. The Afghanistan Compact requires the government to establish by the end of September a mechanism to vet such appointments for competence and integrity. Finding competent people willing to risk their lives in a rural district for \$60-70 a month will remain difficult, but such a mechanism should help avoid appointments such as those hastily made in June.

Government officials have identified the biggest gap in the administration as the district level. Elders (community leaders) from over ten provinces agreed, repeatedly complaining that the government never consults them. Some ministers have proposed paying five to ten elders and ulama (learned clergy) in each district to act as the eyes and ears of government, to be brought to meet governors and the president, to have authority over small projects, and influence what is preached in the mosques. They estimate the cost of such a program at about \$5 million per year.

These leaders could also help recruit 200 young men from each district to serve as auxiliary police. They would receive basic police training and equipment to serve under a police commander who has gone through the reform process. Unlike militias, auxiliary policeman would be paid individually, and the commander would be a professional from outside the district. The elders would be answerable for their behavior.

Courts, too, may require some temporary auxiliary institutions. Community leaders complained constantly about judicial corruption. Many demanded the implementation of shari'a law, which they contrasted not to secular law, but to corruption. As an elder from Paktia said:

Islam says that if you find a thief, he has to be punished. If a murderer is arrested, he has to be tried and executed. In our country, if a murderer is put in prison, after six months he bribes the judge and escapes. If a member of parliament is killed, as in Laghman, his murderer is released after 3-4 months in prison because of bribery.

Lack of law enforcement undermines the basic legitimacy of the government. Enforcement by the government of the decisions of Islamic courts has always constituted a basic pillar of the state's legitimacy in Afghanistan, and failure to do so brands a government as un-Islamic.

The August 5 swearing in of a new Supreme Court, which administers the entire judicial system, will make judicial reform possible, but training a corps of prosecutors, judges, and defense lawyers will take years. The only capacities for dispute resolution and law enforcement that actually exist in much of the country consist of informal village or tribal councils and mullahs who administer a crude interpretation of shari'a. During the years required for reform, the only genuine alternatives before Afghan society will be enforcement of such customary or Islamic law, or no law. The Afghan government and its international supporters will therefore have to find transitional ways to incorporate such procedures into the legal system by recognizing them and subjecting them to judicial or administrative review. Such a program would also put more local Islamic leaders – over 1,200 of whom have been dropped from the government payroll this year – back under government supervision.

Attempts to inject aid into the government have met a major bottleneck: last year the government managed to spend only 44 percent of money it received for development projects. The Ministry of Rural Rehabilitation and Development accounted for nearly half of the government's development spending, while key ministries like agriculture, energy and water, and public works could not execute their budgets. According to the Ministry of Finance, donor countries spent about \$500 million on poorly designed and uncoordinated technical assistance, to little effect. The World Bank is designing a facility that will enable the government to hire the technical advisors it needs, rather than trying to coordinate advisors sent by donors in accord with their own priorities and domestic constituencies. The US should support this initiative as well as a major crash program to increase the implementation capacity of line ministries.

The Economy and Narcotics

Afghanistan is the poorest country in the world except for a handful of countries in sub-Saharan Africa. Policy makers focusing on “killing terrorists” or “holding democratic elections” too often ignore this fundamental fact, which affects everything we try to do there. As numerous studies have documented over the years, Afghanistan has never received the investment of resources needed to stabilize it. International military commanders, who confront the results of this poverty every day, estimate that we need to “double” our resources. Doubling the economic resources going to Afghanistan would still leave it far behind Iraq, and such aid would be far more productive in Afghanistan. Major needs are accelerated road building, purchase of diesel for immediate power production, expansion of cross-border electricity purchase including deals with Pakistan for the south and east, investment in major water projects to improve the productivity of agriculture, development of the infrastructure needed for mineral exploitation, and a massive program of skills building for both the public and private sector.

Afghanistan desperately needs to take on the threat from its narcotics economy in a way consistent with its overall struggle for security and stability. US policy consisted first of aiding all commanders who fought the Taliban, regardless of their involvement in drug trafficking, and then, when the domestic war on drugs lobby raised the issue, to pressure the Afghan government to engage in crop eradication. To Afghans this policy looks like rewarding rich drug dealers and punishing poor farmers, a perception skillfully exploited by the Taliban.

The international drug control regime, which criminalizes narcotics, does not reduce drug use, but it does produce huge profits for criminals and the armed groups and corrupt officials who protect them. Our drug policy grants huge subsidies to our enemies. As long as we maintain our ideological commitment to a policy that funds our enemies, however, the second-best option in Afghanistan is to treat narcotics as a security and development issue. The total export value of opiates produced in Afghanistan has ranged in recent years from 30 to 50 percent of the legal economy. Such an industry cannot be abolished by law enforcement. The immediate priorities are massive rural development in both poppy-growing and non-poppy-growing areas, including roads and cold storage to make other products marketable; programs for employment creation through rural industries; and thoroughgoing reform of the ministry of the interior and other government agencies to root out the major figures involved with narcotics, regardless of political or family connections.

News of this year’s record crop is likely to increase pressure from the US Congress for eradication, including aerial spraying. Such a program would be disastrously self-defeating. If we want to succeed in Afghanistan, we have to help the rural poor (which is almost everyone) and isolate the leading traffickers and the corrupt officials who support them.

Is the Glass Half-Full?

Some policy-makers and observers claim that critics of the effort in Afghanistan have excessive expectations and focus on challenges rather than achievements. They want to

talk about how the glass is half-full, not half empty. As this analysis shows, the glass is much less than half full. In any case, it does not matter how full the glass is, if someone manages to tip it over or pull out the table on which it is resting.

The Afghan intelligence analysis quoted at the head of this report referred implicitly to the saying of Sun Tzu:

Know your enemy, know yourself;
One hundred battles, one hundred victories.

US policy makers have misjudged Afghanistan and misjudged Pakistan; most of all, they have misjudged their own capacity to carry out major strategic changes on the cheap in an area they do not understand. While the Bush administration has sown war and strengthened Iran while claiming to create a “New Middle East,” it has failed to transform the region where the global terrorist threat began and persists. If the US wants to succeed, we need to focus on this core task. To repeat once again: “Until we transform the tribal belt, the US is at risk.”