Human Costs of the Afghanistan War

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Abstract: The war in Afghanistan has been the longest war in United States history. This article argues that from the beginning of the US-led invasion of Afghanistan in late 2001, the US conduct of the war posed great dangers for Afghan civilians. It distinguishes between three phases, each of which held distinct risks for civilians. The first phase, from late 2001 to 2009, was marked by the fight against al Qaeda and insurgent forces; the second phase, from 2009-2010, by counterinsurgency; and the third phase by the transition of security responsibilities from NATO to Afghan security forces. While risk transfer clearly marked the first and third phases, civilians also suffered during the second phase, when the US put a primacy on civilian protection. We argue that neglecting civilian protection has not only been morally problematic but also risks undermining the Western goal of ensuring that Afghanistan will no longer pose a threat to international security.

Keywords: Afghanistan, United States, NATO, casualties, protection of civilians, human rights

Introduction

Afghanistan has been at war for decades.[1] During the 1980s the United States (US) supported proxy forces against the Soviet Union. In late 2001 the US toppled the Taliban government and pushed al Qaeda out of Afghanistan. Once this was accomplished, few would have imagined that Afghanistan would become the longest war in US history. To end the war, the US, other troop-contributing states, and the Afghan government, in 2010, agreed on security transition, whereby NATO would gradually hand over security responsibilities to the Afghan security forces, a process to be completed by the end of 2014.

This article argues that the US conduct of the war in Afghanistan since 2001 has posed great risks to Afghan civilians. The types of risks varied over time. Three phases can be

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1   We thank the interviewees for sharing information and their views with us, and an anonymous reviewer for helpful comments.

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distinguished. During the first phase, the US and its allies focused on the fight against the Taliban and al Qaeda. International military operations caused large numbers of civilian casualties; troops from the US and other countries offered little in terms of active protection to civilians; and the US-supported Afghan statutory and non-statutory security actors that were harming civilians. The second phase lasted from mid-2009 to 2010 and was dominated by a population-centric counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy. While NATO troops, taking higher own risks, killed fewer civilians during that time, COIN led to increased violence by insurgents and a concomitant increase in civilian casualties. During the third phase, the US threw its weight behind Afghan security forces as well as militias, even though particularly the latter were prone to violating human rights.

The first three sections of this article analyze the three phases of the war, examining the use of force and implications for civilian protection, as well as the causes of policy shifts. The conclusion argues that the desire of the US and NATO to leave Afghanistan, in combination with the lack of interest in human rights on the part of the Afghan government, casts a dark shadow over the future of civilian protection in Afghanistan. The consequences of short-fix strategies are not only morally problematic but also undermine Western interests, such as reaching the mission objective of leaving behind a stable Afghanistan.

The empirical information in this article is based on secondary literature, media reports, and personal observation and background talks with members of security forces, international organizations, and NGOs. The talks were conducted in various parts of Afghanistan, in particular in Kabul and the Northern provinces, between 2009 and 2013. The article focuses on the US because of the hegemonic position of the US in Afghanistan, in terms of security personnel, funding, and political clout.

Phase 1: Counter-Terrorism

Following the attacks of 11 September 2001, the US toppled the Taliban government, which had harbored members of al Qaeda. The campaign involved small numbers of Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) and special operations forces who supported the anti-Taliban, Tajik-dominated Northern Alliance as well as General Dostum's Usbek militias, such as by directing US-laser guided missiles against targets. During that campaign, Afghan forces committed war crimes, the most notorious of which was the murder of hundreds, perhaps thousands of presumed Taliban and al Qaeda members captured by Dostum's forces in Northern Afghanistan in late 2001.

The toppling of the Taliban was a case of risk transfer. As Martin Shaw argues, democracies are averse against own casualties and therefore transfer risk to foreign states and societies.[2] Core features of this transfer are technologies such as 'smart bombs', which

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2   Shaw 2006.

allow for maximum physical distance from the battlefield, and reliance on proxy forces. Although the US tried to limit civilian casualties to the extent demanded by International Humanitarian Law (IHL), many civilians died, in particular as a consequence of air strikes.[3]

Civilian deaths continued after the Taliban and al Qaeda had been dislodged from power. In the framework of Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), the US and partner states fought remnants of the Taliban and al Qaeda, particularly in Southern Afghanistan, the Pashtun heartland of the Taliban. Civilian protection had a low priority, beyond the requirements of IHL and its principles of proportionality, necessity, and distinction. These principles leave states much leeway,[4] and the US military liberally interpreted them in order to fight the 'war on terror'.

Counting civilian death is notoriously difficult in Afghanistan because of under-reporting, different methodologies used, lack of access to sites of attack, the practice of burying the dead within a day, and the temptation of security forces to artificially decrease the number of casualties, such as by counting any armed man killed as an insurgent. Estimates therefore vary significantly. According to one source, a total of 6,481 Afghan civilians were killed between 2001 and 2012.[5] According to an even higher estimate, US military operations killed around 9,000 civilians from late 2001 through the first half of 2010.[6]

In addition to combat operations, other US practices were also detrimental to civilian protection. Thus, in the quest for local allies, the US supported strongmen who, in many cases, had little popular support, a practice that fueled the insurgency.[7]Additionally, rivalries between warlords in contested areas allowed insurgents to seep into these areas, forcing civilians to take sides. Furthermore, warlords were involved in crime, in particular drug trafficking, and thus keen to limit attempts to establish the rule of law.

Even if US politicians and the US military had prioritized the protection of civilians against predatory groups, it would have lacked the means, in particular sufficient troop numbers, for doing so. As the Bush administration was fixated on Iraq, it withdrew important capabilities from Afghanistan.

In their quest for local allies, the US began to invest significant resources into Afghan security forces, in particular the Afghan National Army (ANA) and the Afghan National Police (ANP). The latter, receiving massive support from the Pentagon as of 2005, frequently extorted money from citizens and abused human rights.[8] The US, furthermore,

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3   Human Rights Watch 2008.

4   See: Gardam 2004.

5   http://www.thenation.com/afghanistan-database. Accessed 28 January 2014.

6   Tirman 2011, 279.

7   For examples, see Chayes 2006.

8   Wilder 2007.

cooperated closely with Afghanistan's intelligence agency, the National Directorate for Security (NDS). The NDS, with many of their operatives Soviet-trained, was considered effective yet many accused it of torture and of running secret prisons. As a consequence, the practice of the US (as well as other troop-contributing states) to hand over suspect criminals, insurgents, and terrorists to the NDS was problematic.[9] To make matters worse, the US military funded and trained local militias that preyed on rival ethnic groups, triggering armed conflicts on the local level.[10] A lack of civilian protection fueled resentment among local citizens and thus the insurgency (equally, if not more important, the insurgency was supported by elements within the Pakistani security establishment).

Other international actors were more circumspect in the use of force, yet provided little in terms of proactive protection of civilians against insurgents. The United Nations (UN) mandated the establishment of the International Security Assistance Force (ISAF), which as of 2003 was under the command of NATO and which operated in parallel to OEF. ISAF was initially limited to Kabul and only gradually expanded its presence outside the capital. But even then it offered little protection to Afghans against predatory groups, whether warlords, insurgents, or abusive and corrupt Afghan security forces. Afghanistan thus experienced a public security gap that had already plagued international intervention in Bosnia-Herzegovina, Kosovo, Iraq, and elsewhere, and that revealed the inability and unwillingness particularly of the US military to engage in police-like tasks.[11]

A few years into the post-Taliban period, the presence of a major insurgency could no longer be ignored. Not only were there frequent attacks in the restive South and East of the country. Even the relatively peaceful northern and western provinces saw an increase in insurgent attacks.[12] With the US and its partners experiencing an increase in own casualties, NATO stepped up its military efforts, deploying more soldiers to Afghanistan and increasing the use of force. But a more forceful stance led to ever-more civilian casualties, killed by direct fire, indirect fire, and other causes such as traffic accidents. A new approach was needed.

Phase 2: Counter-insurgency

In 2009, the US adopted a counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in Afghanistan. The strategy built upon experiences from Iraq that had been put into doctrine in the famous counterinsurgency manual issued under the leadership of General Petraeus in 2006.[13] Based on the (old) insight that in counterinsurgency the center of gravity is not the enemy

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9   See, for example, Smith 2007.

10   Interview with NGO Security Advisor, Kunduz, April 2013.

11   Perito 2008.

12   See Giustozzi and Reuter 2011.

13   U.S. Army/Marine Corps 2007.

but popular legitimacy, the manual demanded caution in the use of force and put a premium on civilian protection.

US General Stanley McChrystal, commander of ISAF and US forces in Afghanistan, declared in his (leaked) 2009 initial assessment of the war, as well as in tactical directives issued to all international troops, that the protection of civilians was the mission.[14] The COIN strategy, exported from Iraq to Afghanistan, was based on the elements 'shape, clear, hold, and build', that is pushing insurgents out of districts, ensuring a continuing presence in the cleared area, and improving the economy and governance.

In order to protect civilians, McChrystal demanded that international forces accept an increase in own risks. International forces consequently became more circumspect in the choice of methods such as close air support and artillery. Moreover, NATO stepped up engagement with the local population, such as by patrolling on foot and attending local councils (*shuras*). This COIN strategy increased the vulnerability of international troops but at the same time, as intended, reduced the number of civilian casualties caused by international military operations.[15]

However, it is unclear to what extent Afghan civilians benefited from this policy change. Insurgent forces changed tactics in response to the COIN strategy, such as by relying on improvised explosive devices (IED) that often killed civilians instead of security forces, attacking schools or hospitals built by international actors as part of their 'hearts and minds' campaigns, and killing civilians accused of collaborating with the enemy. As human rights advocates argued, "when one party to a conflict makes the population the prize, the opposition is likely to make them a target."[16] For NATO, this was a problem because even in cases where insurgents were responsible for civilian deaths, locals often blamed NATO. The increase in violence in 2010 made it easier for insurgents to recruit new members. One study, analyzing the years of 2009 and 2010, shows that revenge for the death of loved ones became a crucial insurgent recruitment mechanism.[17]

An additional problem was the distinction between combatants and civilians, and more specifically 'capture and kill' operations conducted by special operations forces. While the US touted such operations as effective, it was often unclear whether targets were indeed insurgents. In many cases, special forces were manipulated by Afghans who simply designated their enemies as Taliban. Human intelligence (HUMINT) sources were difficult to obtain and cross-check, while Signal Intelligence (SIGINT) sources were often misleading. Moreover, apparently also people "in proximity" to a target were liable to be killed along with the intended target itself.[18] This was problematic in Afghanistan

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14   ISAF 2009.

15   Tyson 2009.

16   Jackson 2010, 6.

17   See: Condra *et al*. 2010.

18   Clark 2011.

where networks comprise a variety of pro- and anti-government forces, and where people pragmatically change allegiance to increase their survival chances.

The soft, population centric component of the COIN strategy legitimized stepping up its complementary counter-terrorism component. NATO established Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs) across the country but many of the soldiers and civilians stayed inside the PRTs to avoid risk. By contrast, capture and kill operations, often taking place at nighttime with soldiers breaking into Afghan houses, caused much public controversy, and oftentimes triggered (armed) resistance even by citizens among whom the Taliban had little traction, in particular when operations lead to the death of innocent civilians. In the Gortepa area of northwestern Kunduz, American night raids weakened the capacities of the insurgent´s armed wing to operate in the open. In turn, insurgents put more pressure on local citizens to provide organizational and logistical support, with civilians consequently finding themselves "between a rock and a hard place", as one citizen put it.[19]

COIN suffered, furthermore, from the frequent absence of economic reconstruction and (good) governance in districts from which insurgents had been evicted. International troops were better at fighting than in the political and economic realms. Many of their civil-military cooperation (CIMIC) projects were criticized by development organizations who feared being associated with the military and who charged the military of lacking the knowledge required to ensure that quick-impact projects did not fuel local conflicts. There were also too few international civilian experts, and the Afghan government was generally inexistent or predatory.

McChrystal encountered resistance even from within the US military. Many officers and soldiers regarded COIN as incompatible with the US way of war,[20] which traditionally relies on overwhelming force through massive firepower. When David Petraeus replaced McChrystal in 2010, the COIN strategy was maintained with regard to the avoidance of civilian casualties. At the same time however, Petraeus again relied more on 'kinetic' activities – ironically, given that he had been the architect of the COIN strategy in Iraq.[21] For instance, under Petraeus the number of drone strikes went up, particularly in the Pakistani tribal areas. Although the US government and military was adamant that drones kill precisely, at least one study shows that drones kill more civilians than other forms of airpower.[22] Petreaus also stepped up 'capture or kill' operations.

Increased military pressure on insurgents led to their radicalization: dead commanders were often replaced by younger commanders whose agenda went beyond efforts to force NATO out of Afghanistan. Older commanders were generally recruited locally in their

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19   Interview with local Pasthun from Gortepa area, Kunduz, Summer 2013.

20   For examples, see Hastings 2012.

21   Kaplan 2013.

22   See: Lewis and Holewinski 2013.

area of operation. Being part of the community, they tended to care more for the needs and the security of the local population. With the US targeting campaign killing local commanders, their replacements were often young, radicalized madrassa students who showed little empathy towards the local population. Their goal was to make themselves a name as ruthless fighters, if need be at the expense of the population´s security.

Third Phase: Security Transition

In 2010, the Afghan government and NATO member states agreed that NATO would gradually hand over responsibility for security to Afghan forces, a process to be completed by the end of 2014. After this date, NATO said it would no longer have combat troops in the country, with the possible exceptions of relatively small numbers of forces tasked with counter-terrorism and training.

War fatigue in donor states was the major factor spurring the security transition. The war in Afghanistan was the longest war in US history, and a huge one, with 101,000 US troops deployed in 2011.[23] As of 31 January 2014, according to official sources, 2,170US soldiers had been killed in Afghanistan and nearly 20,000 wounded in action.[24] Casualty tolerance is generally higher in wars of necessity (i.e. wars of defense and national liberation) than in wars of choice (such as humanitarian interventions). The US regarded the Afghan war as a war of necessity, that is a response to 9/11. However, public support for foreign missions, and casualties, erodes when the prospect of achieving the mission objective fades away.[25] This was the case in Afghanistan. A major problem here was the lack of a reliable local partner: the US increasingly came to regard the Karzai administration as corrupt and incompetent (a view shared by many Afghans).

The security transition had different policy elements, all of which proved problematic from a civilian protection point of view. One element was to negotiate a peace with insurgents groups, in particular the Taliban Quetta Shura. Many within the new urban middle class, as well as women's rights groups, were weary of seeing a return of the Taliban to power. The push for negotiations furthermore weakened the "buy in" into the Afghan state of some groups, especially elements of the former Northern Alliance who saw a power sharing with the Taliban as a red line that was not to be crossed.

The most important strategy element was the transition of security responsibilities from ISAF to the ANA and ANP. Relying on local forces reduces physical risks to own forces (the population of sending countries cares little about dead foreign combatants), and is cheaper than fielding own soldiers and police officers. Furthermore, if proxies abuse

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23   Burns 2012.

24   Data from Department of Defence Casualty Status, at www.defense.gov/news/casualty.pdf . Accessed 8 August 2013.

25   See: Gelpi, Feaver and Reifler 2009.

human rights, sponsors can easily deny responsibility and argue that human rights abuses would be even worse were it not for foreign support.

The main motor driving the security transition was the NATO Training Mission Afghanistan (NTM-A), which was part of ISAF and which had been created in 2009. Most of the funding and personnel for NTM-A came from the US, or more precisely the Pentagon's Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan (CSTC-A). In the run-up to the 2014 deadline, NTM-Atrained and mentored their Afghan counterparts, behind the wire and in the field, provided equipment, intelligence, and logistical support, and restructured Afghan ministries. By early 2013, Afghan security forces were nominally leading most operations, with ISAF providing merely backup in areas that Afghans lacked, such as close air support and medical evacuation.

In addition to supporting the ANA and ANP, the US also threw its weight behind non-statutory armed groups. The largest of these was the Afghan Local Police (ALP), which the US said it would grow to 30,000 members or even more. The ALP was preceded by similar though smaller programs, including the Afghan Auxiliary Police Force, the Afghan Public Protection Force (which in mid-2013 was still in place, as an alternative to private security companies), and the Community Defense Initiative. ALP units were composed of local men recruited from within their districts. US special forces offered training, which lasted as little as two weeks; sometimes no training was offered at all. The US also covered the costs of the ALP.

While the ALP initiative was driven by the US, the Afghan government needed little convincing about its merits. One reason was that the ALP provided badly needed manpower in districts threatened by insurgents. From a less benign interpretation, the ALP offered opportunities for kickbacks and for the nepotistic distribution of positions by the central government in Kabul as well as by politicians on the level of provinces and districts. The ALP was particularly attractive for local commanders who already had men under arms. Fielding an ALP unit allowed commanders to receive funding, weapons and training from the US, to enhance their legitimacy, and to continue commanding militias that had been created either by themselves or under previous local defense unit programs and that were under threat to be disbanded. For the US, the ALP was attractive because building the ALP was cheaper than building the ANP. Also, in contrast to the ANP, the ALP could be disbanded or included into the official "taskeel" (the staffing plan for security forces) once security improved and fewer boots on the ground were needed (so was the hope). According to one senior US military officers, "The ALP was never designed to be anything other than a short-term fix."[26]

There were further reasons as to why the US supported the ALP. Washington and the US military thought the ALP dovetailed with an Afghan militia tradition, in particular the

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26   Colonel Ashton Hayes (US Army), Senior Advisor to the Afghan Interior Minister, CSTC-A (Combined Security Transition Command – Afghanistan), Camp Eggers, Kabul, 21 July 2013.

Arbaki. This belief was strong even though decades of war had transformed traditional tribal structures and even though the Arbaki had more traction among the Pashtu than among Tajiks, Hazaras, and other ethnic groups. In addition to that, Arbaki militias, traditionally, were ad-hoc outfits, temporarily put together to implement tribal law (Pashtunwali) and never intended to be long-term neighborhood defense forces.

Semi-private local defense initiatives such as the ALP were also popular because they evoked positive images of security privatization within the US, and because militias were seen as having protected US interests in the past, even if the impact on human rights was disastrous. The figure of 30,000 paramilitaries, for example, is not new. In Laos, from 1960 to 1974, the CIA supported a secret, 30,000 strong army of Hmong tribesmen to fight communist insurgents.[27] Other cases of US-supported militia programsincluded Nicaragua in the 1980s and, more recently, Iraq. In Iraq, the US had supported Sunni militias fighting al Qaeda, as part of the 'Sons of Iraq' program. General Petraeus, as part of ISAF commander, indicated a transfer of previous practices to Afghanistan in comparing the ALP to "a neighborhood watch with AK 47", and "a little bit like the Sons of Iraq".[28]

The security transition bore significant risks for civilians. One issue was the effectiveness of the Afghan security forces. Although NATO praised their progress, serious operational and logistical shortcomings stymied the capacity of the ANA and ANP to independently conduct complex operations against insurgents.[29] Moreover, the ANA had a tendency to stay inside their bases, instead of being close to the population through tactics such as foot patrols. The ANP, by contrast, was dispersed across the country, with many units manning static checkpoints where they were soft targets for insurgents. Consequently, police casualty figures were horrendous. By July 2013, having grown to 152,000 members, 75 ANP officers were killed *per week*.[30] In districts where the population felt threatened by insurgents and criminal groups, the Afghan government therefore has little to offer in terms of protection. Tension between the different security forces exacerbated the situation. The ANP and the ANA would often refuse to reinforce each other even in cases of attack, as happened for example in Faryab province in summer of 2013.[31]

Even more serious was the lack of concern for civilian protection. Insurgents have been responsible for most victims of the Afghan war. In the first half of 2013, they caused 74 percent of civilian casualties (civilians killed and wounded in armed conflict), with IEDs being the main cause of death.[32] However, pro-government forces (Afghan security forces and international troops), too, were responsible for significant numbers of civilian

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27   See: McCoy 2003, 289.

28   Briefing by General Petraeus, Kabul, ISAF Headquarters, 9 October 2010.

29   Cordesman 2013.

30   This figure was confirmed by Major-General Dean Milner, Deputy Commanding General NTM-A, Camp Eggers, Kabul, 21 July 2013.

31   Background Talk with J2 Officer, Mazar-e Sharif, Summer 2013.

32   United Nations 2013, 1.

casualties. US forces continued making mistakes, and their definition of legitimate targets was often dubious. In one example, on 20 April 2013, attack helicopters targeted students of a Mullah in Balkh province who was presumed to be connected to the insurgency. This Mullah, not least due to his position and the presence of insurgents in the area, did indeed have ties to the insurgency and was critical of the Afghan Government and international military forces. But he was inclined to support development programs and facilitated, for instance, safe passage for international project staff working in his area of influence.[33]

To be sure, ISAF was doing better now than before. Starting in 2008, and with increased momentum since 2009, ISAF institutionalized the avoidance of civilian casualties in military operations, setting up specialized units tracking and analyzing civilian casualty incidents and recommending mitigation strategies. Casualty figures continued to drop, indicating organizational learning on the part of US forces and NATO as a whole. For example, in 2012, the number of civilian casualties caused by ISAF fell by 40 per cent.[34] It must be noted though that this drop was partly due to a reduction in the number of ISAF operations. Also, by contrast, Afghan security forces caused more civilian casualties. President Karzai, on many occasions, had scolded NATO for causing civilian casualties. But the Afghan government was generally muted in its criticism for such casualties caused by Afghan security forces, while the latter were reluctant to assume responsibility for 'collateral damage'. Moreover, there was a serious risk of under-reporting. A tracking team reported civilian casualties to a unit within the Afghan president's office established in May 2012. But the information relied on the records of security bodies; complaints from individuals and non-state actors were not taken into account.[35]

Thus, by 2013 there were doubts over whether ISAF had successfully transferred its casualty mitigation policy to Afghan security forces and the Afghan government. Though ISAF was adamant that it invested much effort into ensuring that the transfer would work, human rights activists were concerned that for ISAF, pressing Afghan security forces to avoid civilian casualties had lower priority than enhancing their battle readiness.[36]

A lack of concern for civilian protection manifested itself, furthermore, in human rights abuses committed by Afghan security forces. Many such abuses were attributed to the ANP. In 2013, as during the previous years, corruption, drug consumption, and human rights violations undermined not only the effectiveness of the ANP but also their popular legitimacy. While NATO officials insisted that police training improved the ANP's treatment of Afghan civilians, such claims cannot be verified. After all, the Afghan Ministry of Interior tended to deploy trained units to high-risk districts where their subsequent performance was not tracked.

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33   Background talks with the above mentioned Mullah in Mazar-e Sharif, May 2013.

34   Interview with Colonel Nikolay Dotzev, ISAF Chief Civilian Casualties Coordinator, ISAF HQ, Kabul, 20 July 2013.

35   United Nations 2013, 6–7.

36   Phone interview with Heather Barr of Human Rights Watch, 4 July 2013.

The most worrying reports concerned the ALP, however. Their performance varied substantially across provinces and districts. In some, they managed to contain the Taliban without much 'collateral damage'. In Charbolak district of Balkh province, the governor managed to co-opt local Pashtun militias, leading to a drop in security incidents in this previously highly dangerous area. By contrast, in Khanabad district in Kunduz province, militias engaged in murder, kidnapping, looting, collection of taxes, and blackmailing. In fact, citizens charged the ALP of crimes particularly in Northern Baghlan and Kunduz provinces,[37] where tensions between ethnic groups had been rife for some time. Ethnically homogenous ALP groups, once 'in uniform', immediately started harassing and attacking their adversaries.

US support to the ALP ignored the fact that many Afghans did not want militias – they associated them with the 1992–1996 war during which warlords and their militias had killed tens of thousands of civilians.[38] The ALP thus risked becoming counterproductive, as in many districts citizens demanded a return of the Taliban to protect them from militias.

Besides, the loyalty of the ALP to the government was questionable. This was particularly the case during periods when ALP units were not paid. Up until mid-2012, the US paid the ANP directly, in cash. Subsequently, the US provided funding through the Afghan Ministry of Interior, which included the ALP in the policing tashkeel. During that transition process, some ALP units went unpaid. Militias often caused insecurity, in order to legitimize their own existence and receive funding from international military forces.[39] More importantly, militias were integrated into the ALP that had been fighting with the Taliban or where ready to join the insurgents. As a consequence, in many of the districts that ISAF handed over to Afghan security forces (and the ALP), the insurgents regained control. This happened, for example, in Archi district of Kunduz province in summer 2013.[40]

From the ALP point of view, their pragmatism was not only a matter of increasing their power and of making money; it was also a matter of survival. The main statutory Afghan security forces often regarded the ALP as alien, and were therefore reluctant to come to the aid of ALP units attacked by insurgents. This compelled some ALP units or individual members to work with insurgents.

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37   Interviews with representatives of a development organization in these provinces, July 2013; also see United Nations 2013, 50–53.

38   See: Human Rights Watch 2011.

39   One example is Sayyid Murad, an Aimaq ALP commander from Aliabad district of Kunduz province who had a reputation for shooting BM1 rockets towards the PRT and afterwards demanding support for preventing insurgents from operating in the area.

40   Personal observation.

Conclusion

International actors have, since late 2001, supported Afghan civilians in many ways. Many of the military casualties from the US and other troop-contributing states were killed and wounded during operations intended, implicitly or explicitly, to protect civilians. Moreover, donors have significantly improved the country's infrastructure since 2002, starting nearly from scratch. One should not belittle progress in fields such as women's rights and access to health care, education, and electricity. Furthermore, the fact that human rights norms have gained traction across the globe has been visible in Afghanistan, too. During the Cold War, US training for Latin American military and police forces included elements advocating torture.[41] Nowadays, with scrutiny from the news media and with lawyers integrated into command structures of armed forces, training in international humanitarian law and human rights law is incorporated into military operations as well as international security assistance.

At the same time, international military operations in Afghanistan, as well as support to Afghan statutory and non-statutory security forces, have harmed civilians. Whether Afghan civilians would have been better off without the US-led invasion and the ensuing insurgency and counter-insurgency, as well as with increasing crime and public insecurity, is a question difficult to answer, and the answer would depend on whom you ask. One would have to factor in positive and negative implications of continuing Taliban rule for a variety of human rights. Also, Afghanistan might have experienced a continuation of civil war without the US-led invasion in 2001.

What seems clear though is that the future does not look bright. In the first six months of 2013, the number of civilian casualties increased by 23 percent as compared to the same period of 2012.[42] None of the likely scenarios – authoritarian nepotistic government, Taliban rule, civil war, proxy war, or fragmentation into more or less stable areas – bode well for civilian protection and human rights. An increase in the number of refugees and asylum seekers from Afghanistan reveal the lack of confidence of many Afghans in the future of the country.

The US and other donor states are geared towards proxy war, even though this means having to fund Afghan security forces over many years. If funding ceased, history might repeat itself: the Najibullah regime, in the early 1990s, was swept aside by the Mudjahiddin shortly after the Soviet Union stopped paying for its proxy's army. The window of opportunity for systematic security sector reform (SSR), which provides effective and efficient security *within a democratic framework*, has closed. The West is committed to leaving Afghanistan.

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41   See, for instance Gill 2004.

42   United Nations 2013.

The "zero option" – the withdrawal of all international forces from Afghanistan and, therewith, potentially large parts of the international funding for the Afghan security forces – would have severe consequences. The influence of the Afghan government would de facto be reduced to the major cities, while large parts of the country would be controlled by insurgents or rival militias.

Even if international actors had the appetite for continuing involving in Afghanistan and democratization, any attempts to replace 'train and equip' programs with a human security approach would meet opposition from insurgents, warlords, and declared religious conservatives. More importantly, the Karzai government would stymie such attempts (bypassing the government is not an option because of the centralized political system, put in place under US auspices and with the US presidential system in mind). For example, in 2013 president Karzai de facto destroyed an independent and internationally-funded human rights body by changing its composition, appointing among others one former Taliban official.[43]

By early 2014, insurgents benefited both from the prospect of an international withdrawal as well as a continuing international military presence. The latter would give mainstream insurgent groups a *raison d´être*. A complete withdrawal, on the other hand (as well as less or no international funding for the Afghan security forces) would embolden insurgents in their attempt to overthrow the Afghan government.

In any case, donor states should be aware that train and equip programs bear significant risks not only for the local population but for donors as well. Again, history provides valuable lessons. The Taliban's popular support base has always been thin. But their assumption of power in 1996 (and in extension the later Taliban-al Qaeda alliance) was aided by the abuses committed by the Mujahiddin who had received support from the US, as well as rampant crime and public insecurity. Quick-fix experiments such as the ALP initiative can easily backfire against their sponsors.

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43   See: Bezhan 2013.

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