

Afghanistan: Five Years Later

By Stephen Zunes | October 13, 2006

On the fifth anniversary of the launch of the U.S.-led war against Afghanistan, the Taliban is on the offensive, much of the countryside is in the hands of warlords and opium magnates, U.S. casualties are mounting, and many, if not most, Afghans are actually worse off now than they were before the U.S. invasion.

UN figures place Afghan living standards as the worst in the world, outside of the poorest five countries of sub-Saharan Africa, with life expectancy of less than 45 years (compared with 70 years in neighboring Iran). The per capita gross domestic product (GDP) is under \$200 (compared with \$1650 in Iran). Fewer than three Afghans in 10 are literate, and infant mortality is among the highest in the world. The economy is barely functioning, with the country's 24 million people dependent on foreign aid, the opium trade, and remittances from the five million Afghans living abroad.

The U.S.-backed government of President Hamid Karzai has little credibility within the country. Afghans routinely refer to him as “the mayor of Kabul,” since his authority doesn't extend much beyond the capital city, or more derisively as the “assistant to the American ambassador,” given his lack of real authority relative to U.S. occupation forces. Historically, Afghans respect strong leaders who can at minimum deliver some degree of security and occasional economic favors. Karzai has thus far been unable to provide either to the vast majority of his country's people.

The U.S.-managed presidential elections in 2004 and parliamentary elections last year—organized with very little input from the Afghan people regarding structure or scheduling—were riddled with fraud, including stuffed ballot boxes, vote-

buying, intimidation, and multiple voting. U.S. officials actively pressured a number of prominent presidential candidates to drop out of the race to help ensure Karzai's election. Even if the results of the elections were broadly representative of public sentiment, unelected warlords in the provinces make the majority of political decisions that affect people's daily lives.

Barnett Rubin, America's foremost scholar on Afghanistan, described the country as not having “functioning state institutions. It has no genuine army or effective police. Its ramshackle provincial administration is barely in contact with, let alone obedient to, the central government. Most of the country's meager tax revenue has been illegally taken over by local officials who are little more than warlords with official titles.” According to Rubin, the goal of U.S. policy in Afghanistan “was not to set up a better regime for the Afghan people, but to recruit and strengthen warlords in its fight against al-Qaida.”

While women are now allowed to go to school and leave the house unaccompanied by a close male relative—rights denied to them under the Taliban—most women in large parts of Afghanistan are afraid to do so out of fear of kidnapping and rape. Human Rights Watch reports that, despite the ouster of the misogynist Taliban, “Violence against women and girls remains rampant.”



The security situation in the countryside is so bad that groups like Medecins Sans Frontieres—which stayed in Afghanistan throughout the Soviet war and occupation of the 1980s, the civil war and chaos of the early to mid-1990s, and the brutal repression of the Taliban through 2001—have completely withdrawn from the country.

Yet the Bush administration continues to be in denial about the worsening situation in Afghanistan. President Bush recently declared that Afghanistan was doing so well that it was “inspiring others ... to demand their freedom.” And Vice President Cheney has referred to the rapidly deteriorating Afghan republic as a “rising nation.” Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld earlier described the new Afghanistan as “a breathtaking accomplishment” and “a successful model.”

Amnesty International reports, however, that during the past year, “The government and its international partners remained incapable of providing security to the people of Afghanistan. Absence of rule of law, and a barely functional criminal justice system, left many victims of human rights violations, especially women, without redress. Over 1,000 civilians were killed in attacks by U.S. and Coalition forces and by armed groups. U.S. forces continue to carry out arbitrary arrests and indefinite detentions.”

The Bush administration has not taken kindly to reports of abuse of prisoners and other violations of international humanitarian law. Last year, angry anti-American demonstrations in Afghan cities protesting abuses of Afghan prisoners by American jailers resulted in U.S.-commanded Afghan police shooting into crowds, leaving 16 dead. Following a *Newsweek* report of abuses of Afghan prisoners, Rumsfeld angrily denounced the magazine and warned that “people need to be careful what they

say.” The Bush administration dismissed pleas by President Karzai to rethink its tactics and to allow for greater Afghan control of police and military operations.

Warlords, including war criminals that brutalized the Afghan people prior to the Taliban’s takeover, now rule a number of Afghan provinces. In the north of the country, they are actually allied with former leaders of the repressive Communist regime against whom the United States fought a proxy war in the 1980s. A number of notorious warlords now sit in the cabinet and hold other high posts in the U.S.-backed regime. Kathy Gannon, who worked for 18 years as the Associated Press correspondent in Kabul, has observed in her new book *I is for Infidel* that the Afghan government includes “the biggest collection of mass murderers you’ll ever get in one place.” Gannon reports that Afghan Defense Minister Abdul Rashid Dostum’s “viciousness was legendary in Afghanistan.” The United States, which has enormous leverage on the Afghan government, has refused to press Kabul to bring these war criminals to justice. In fact, top U.S. military officials work closely with the war criminal Dostum on internal security issues.

The Rise of the Drug Lords

Fifteen years ago, Afghanistan supplied 90% of the heroin entering Europe. When the Taliban came to power in 1996, they imposed the greatest curtailment of opium production in a half century, reducing production to only a small fraction of its size earlier in the decade. Virtually the entire crop that remained at the time the United States began bombing Afghanistan five years ago was in areas controlled by the Northern Alliance, which the United States helped bring to power soon thereafter. Indeed, the Bush administration has had a history of cozying up to drug lords. Hazrat Ali and

Haji Mohammed Zaman—who along with U.S. forces led the Afghan ground attack against the al-Qaida holdout in Tora Bora—had long been the biggest heroin and opium magnates in the Pashtun areas of Afghanistan.

This past year saw the largest harvest of opium poppies in history, now representing a full one-third of the Afghan economy. As much as 92% of the world's illegal heroin now comes from Afghanistan, leading to a dramatic drop in prices and an increase of consumption. The UN Office on Drugs and Crime, in its authoritative annual survey, reported that “opium cultivation in Afghanistan is out of control” and that “Afghan opium is fueling insurgency in Western Asia, feeding international mafias and causing 100,000 deaths from overdoses every year.”

The Bush administration has resisted pressure to take action against the drug lords, refusing to bomb drug labs and directing troops not to take action if they come upon opium crops or heroin production. According to *New York Times* reporter James Risen in his book *State of War*, Rumsfeld has met personally with Afghan military commanders known to be among “the godfathers of drug trafficking” and made it clear that their illegal enterprise would be tolerated as long as they remained allied with the United States.

Aside from the impact of increased opium production on addicts and their societies worldwide, this resumption of large-scale Afghan opium production is a significant threat to Afghanistan's stability, since it is one of the major sources of the warlordism that has wreaked such havoc on the country. And, despite cracking down on opium production while in power, the Taliban are now taxing poppy growers to finance as much as 70% of their renewed military operations. As in Colombia, the

ongoing violence since the United States launched its war five years ago has resulted in all sides taking advantage of the drug trade to advance their power and influence.

The Taliban's Comeback

The Taliban emerged under the leadership of young Islamist seminarians raised in refugee camps in Pakistan during the 1980s. During that time, a repressive Communist regime ruled Afghanistan with the support of tens of thousands of Soviet troops who occupied the country and engaged in a brutal bombing campaign that took the lives of hundreds of thousands of civilians and forced up to six million Afghans into exile. In 1992, U.S.-backed mujahadeen fighters ousted the Communist regime. The country then descended into chaos as competing factions fought one another. Out of this turmoil arose the Taliban militia. Many Afghans initially welcomed the new force for bringing desperately needed stability and order to the country despite their extremist and totalitarian brand of Islamic rule.

Because the United States failed to bring order to the country after attacking Afghanistan and overthrowing its government five years ago, the Taliban is tragically on the comeback. Rampant corruption within the U.S.-backed government and ongoing civilian casualties from U.S. military operations have also contributed to popular resentment and helped fuel the Taliban's resurgence. British General David Richards, who serves as NATO's commander in Afghanistan, said in an interview with the Associated Press that if conditions for ordinary Afghans do not improve soon, the majority could switch their support to the Taliban. While Afghans are aware of the “austere and unpleasant life” under the extremist Islamist movement, Richards said, as many as 70% of the population would prefer a

return to Taliban rule if the U.S.-led coalition fails “to start achieving concrete and visible improvement” to the lives of ordinary citizens.

The respected European think tank, the Senlis Council, reported last month that the Taliban is “taking back Afghanistan” and now controls much of the southern and eastern parts of the country. According to the report, “U.S. policies in Afghanistan have re-created the safe haven for terrorism that the 2001 invasion aimed to destroy.” The Taliban are as ruthless as ever, attacking civilians who refuse to support them and specifically targeting women working for relief groups. They are not alone, however. What the Bush administration labels “Taliban” also includes a growing coalition that consists of other clans of Pashtun warriors long renowned for their resistance to foreigners, as well as nationalist forces once backed by the United States during the 1980s in the war against the Communist regime in Kabul. Very few of the guerrillas confronting American and other NATO forces are foreigners or al-Qaida. Virtually all of them are ordinary Afghans. Some identify with the Taliban, some do not. All see themselves as part of the longstanding tradition of resisting outside invaders, whether British, Soviets, or Americans.

The Taliban offensive in the past year has taken the lives of more than 2,800 Afghans and 160 Coalition troops. U.S. troop strength has grown by 15% in the past six months to 22,000, and the casualty rate for U.S. soldiers relative to their numbers is even higher than in Iraq.

Even many Bush administration supporters are recognizing the seriousness of the situation. After meeting with senior U.S. military officials in southern Afghanistan, Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist observed, “It sounds to me ... that the Taliban is everywhere.” Raising questions as to whether a

purely military strategy would work, he added that, to prevail, Coalition forces needed “to assimilate people who call themselves Taliban into a larger, more representative government.”

Misplaced U.S. Priorities

The war waged five years ago this fall might well have been avoided by engaging in serious negotiations with the Taliban regime to bring Osama bin Laden to justice. The reliance on high-altitude bombing—with its concomitant high levels of civilian casualties—may have been less effective in rooting out al-Qaida than focusing primarily on small-unit commando operations.

Even after these questionable strategies in the initial U.S.-led military campaign, the United States still could have handled the post-Taliban situation better. The Bush administration should have pressed for peace negotiations between rival Afghans parties instead of handing power over to the Islamists and militia commanders who had allied with the United States in its proxy war against the Soviets in the 1980s.

Until recently, when it transferred command of Afghan military operations to NATO and successfully pushed for additional forces from Canada and various European countries, the United States did not actively solicit support from other nations out of an apparent desire to steer the political and economic direction of post-Taliban Afghanistan unimpeded. Instead, the United States subcontracted security of much of the country to the warlords, who have actually served to destabilize the country. Though President Karzai initially tried to curb the power of the warlords, the United States deliberately strengthened their power because they were fighting the scattered remnants of the Taliban and al-Qaida. Furthermore, following the Taliban’s

overthrow, the United States rejected international calls for the establishment of a genuinely multinational force with adequate numbers to maintain order, which would have included large numbers of troops from Muslim countries.

If the United States had given priority to establishing security beyond the capital city of Kabul, the new Afghan government would have more easily consolidated its authority and disarmed warlords and other rogue elements. With adequate security and funding, development projects could have enabled the government to win more popular support and brought more moderate supporters of the Taliban into the political process. In addition, the power of the drug lords would have diminished, and farmers could have found better ways of making a living than growing opium poppies.

President Karzai has criticized the lack of development aid from the United States, particularly compared with the half trillion dollars the United States has poured into Iraq. In the past two years, the United States has slashed spending for reconstruction for Afghanistan by 30% to help pay for the Iraq war, and very little of the development aid promised by the United States has actually gone to help ordinary Afghans. The respected development agency Action Aid International estimates that only 14% of U.S. aid to Afghanistan has actually gone to legitimate development projects, with nearly half of it paying overpriced and dubiously qualified American technical consultants and much of the rest going for the purchase of American products of questionable value to Afghanistan's development priorities. Indeed, U.S. economic assistance for rebuilding the country is only a fraction of what the United States has spent to bomb it.

Karzai has also called on the United States to concentrate its military efforts on stopping the flow of

men and arms from sanctuaries in Pakistan instead of conducting air strikes against civilian areas and raids on private homes, which further alienate ordinary Afghans from the government and increase their sympathy for the Taliban. Though nominally a sovereign nation, the Afghan government has no control over U.S. military operations in the country, and U.S. troops can detain Afghan citizens indefinitely without charge and without permission of their government.

While the media and Democratic Party leaders have increasingly acknowledged the tragic blunders of U.S. policy in post-Saddam Iraq, few have raised their voices about the Bush administration's tragic mishandling of post-Taliban Afghanistan beyond the failure to capture Osama bin Laden at Tora Bora at the end of 2001.

U.S. failures in Afghanistan are closely connected to the U.S. decision to invade Iraq. In addition to sapping financial resources that could have provided development aid needed to win over Afghan hearts and minds, the United States diverted soldiers, spy satellites, military equipment, and other vital resources away from the unfinished job in Afghanistan. For example, the U.S. Army's Fifth Special Forces group and other elite units originally slated to continue tracking down al-Qaida remnants and Taliban leaders left for the Persian Gulf in 2002 to prepare for the invasion of Iraq.

Despite these manifold failures of Bush administration policy, however, the United States can take several steps to contribute to the prospects of peace and security in Afghanistan. It should develop a counter-insurgency strategy that lessens reliance on air power, which has thus far resulted in large-scale civilian casualties and, as a result, increased anti-American and anti-government sentiment. The multinational force in Afghanistan should expand

to include troops from Muslim nations to counter the xenophobia resulting from the predominance of North American and European forces. The United States should insist that Pakistan eliminate the sanctuaries used by Taliban and al-Qaida forces to infiltrate into Afghanistan, which may require U.S. pressure on the Musharraf dictatorship to consent to free elections that can allow for a more credible representative government.

On the economic front, the United States should dramatically increase international assistance to Afghanistan under UN supervision designed to create sustainable development, particularly in rural areas. It should support a campaign against opium production and provide viable income-producing alternatives for the rural economy. And it should

pressure the Karzai regime to crack down on corruption and purge his government of war criminals, opium magnates, and others who have abused the human rights of the Afghan people.

It's not too late for the United States to reverse course in Afghanistan and, with sensible military and economic policies, prevent the country from further slipping into the violence and lawlessness that threaten to push the country down the same path as Iraq.

Stephen Zunes is Middle East editor for the Foreign Policy In Focus Project. He is a professor of politics and the author of Tinderbox: U.S. Middle East Policy and the Roots of Terrorism (Common Courage Press, 2003).

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the International Relations Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©Creative Commons - some rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to "making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner." For more information, visit www.fpiif.org.

Recommended citation:

Stephen Zunes, "Afghanistan: Five Years Later" (Silver City, NM and Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, October 13, 2006).

Web location:

<http://www.fpiif.org/fpiftxt/3597>

Production Information:

Writer: Stephen Zunes

Editor: John Feffer, IRC

Layout: Chellee Chase-Saiz, IRC

p. 6

www.fpiif.org

A Think Tank Without Walls

