

AFGHANISTAN: THE IMPOSSIBLE TRANSITION

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace (2011)

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SOUTH ASIA | JUNE 2011

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Contents

| | |
|---|-----------|
| Summary | 1 |
| Introduction | 3 |
| The Coalition's Shrunken Space | 6 |
| The Population's Support | 9 |
| The Afghan Government | 11 |
| Tribal Engagement | 12 |
| The Insurgency | 13 |
| The Modus Vivendi Between the Different Groups | 13 |
| The Articulation of Objectives and Tactics | 13 |
| Sanctuary and Transnational Networks | 15 |
| Conclusion: The Missing Link | 17 |
| Notes | 19 |
| About the Author | 23 |
| Carnegie Endowment for International Peace | 24 |

Summary

A combination of two critical problems threatens to undermine the mission of the United States–led coalition in Afghanistan: the failure of the counter-insurgency strategy and a disconnect between political objectives and military operations. If anything, the current strategy is making a political solution less likely, notably because it is antagonizing Pakistan without containing the rise of the armed opposition. That has put the coalition in a paradoxical situation, in which it is being weakened militarily by a non-negotiated and inevitable withdrawal while at the same time alienating potential negotiating partners. The Obama administration has made new appointments to head the defense and intelligence agencies, and, in Afghanistan, has installed a new leadership to oversee U.S. military forces and named a new ambassador. The U.S. administration must take advantage of these appointments to establish greater coherence in both policy and operations:

- The 2014 transition anticipated by the coalition is unrealistic because the Afghan army will not be capable of containing an insurgency that is gathering significant strength. If the transition were carried out, it would provide a considerable boost to the insurgency and, ultimately, the defeat of the Karzai regime. The July 2011 withdrawal must not significantly weaken the coalition, or it will create a military and political vacuum and ultimately make the success of the negotiations less likely.
- In the border provinces of Pakistan, we are now seeing the creation of a sanctuary liable to harbor jihadist groups, including Lashkar-e-Taiba and al-Qaeda fighters. This is alarming because counterterrorism operations cannot eliminate groups in a sanctuary that is steadily growing larger. Meanwhile, the coalition's operations are essentially focused on the southern regions where these jihadist groups do not exist. In practice, the only way to contain the threat posed by transnational jihadist groups is to politically reintegrate the Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami into a coalition government in order to isolate the most radical groups.
- The Western withdrawal therefore inevitably requires a political agreement with the Taliban leadership, which implies abandoning the coalition's reintegration policy. Confrontation with Pakistan is not an option since American leverage on Islamabad is limited and the Pakistani army has some influence over the insurgents, which would be useful should negotiations take place.

Introduction

The U.S. strategy is hard for the public to understand; in fact, despite ambiguities stemming from varying assessments within the Obama administration, the United States is banking, at least as far as we can see on the ground, on a military victory.¹ Targeted strikes against Taliban fighters are the weapon of choice to destabilize the insurgency and force the fighters to surrender.² The “reintegration” program, to which the United States has already allocated some \$50 million, represents the institutional cornerstone of this policy. Contrary to what is often said about local and national approaches complementing each other, reintegration is fundamentally contrary to any negotiation process because it assumes the progressive weakening of the insurgency. Likewise, operations in the provinces of Kandahar and Helmand must succeed for the coalition to change perceptions in Afghanistan and in the West and to disrupt the Taliban movement in areas where it is strong.

Military progress would then allow the coalition to gradually withdraw. This strategy assumes that sufficient time and money have been allocated, which explains why the importance of July 2011—the withdrawal’s scheduled beginning date—is being played down in favor of 2014, the slated end of the transition. In effect, the U.S. army plans to maintain military pressure on the Taliban during the next three years while security responsibilities are transferred to the Afghan army.

What are the results of this strategy? According to the Pentagon, “Overall, a sound strategy and sufficient resources have given the coalition sufficient momentum to capitalize on these gains through the summer and, in July 2011, to begin the process of transitioning security to the Afghan government.” These positive assessments validate the decision to implement a surge and allow the European and American governments to begin their withdrawal in summer 2011, in response to growing public opposition to the war. But this consensus is based on an illusion. Indeed, the U.S. strategy has practically no chance of succeeding and is in fact preventing the only realistic solution—opening negotiations with the Taliban leadership. The current approach is running up against two problems that, far from being resolved, will only grow worse: the weakness of the Afghan partner and the active opposition of Pakistan. With respect to the first point, because of the weakness of state institutions, it has become hard to talk about a functional Afghan state. The growing autonomy of local powers, the weakness of democratic institutions, and a diminishing ability to serve

The U.S. strategy has practically no chance of succeeding and is in fact preventing the only realistic solution—opening negotiations with the Taliban leadership.

the population all point to the state's progressive deterioration. The countless reports and recommendations on state building now seem disconnected from reality, particularly given the fact that the ability of the United States to influence the behavior of the Afghan government is decreasing rapidly.

On questions of governance, in fact, the U.S. influence is now negligible. For example, the public or private demands of the American administration concerning the corruption of public officials or the connections of drug dealers inside the state apparatus have been unanswered. Moreover, the role of the Afghan army remains extremely problematic for well-known reasons: the ethnic imbalance of recruits, large turnover, weak training, and Taliban infiltration.³ In effect, there is nothing to indicate that the army will be able to act autonomously over a large part of the country's territory in two or three years; at present, not a single unit is autonomous. There is, in fact, little possibility in the coming years of transferring responsibility for the protection of the provinces bordering Pakistan to the Afghan army.

Pakistan's approach in the post-bin Laden environment is now one of head-on opposition to the United States.

On the second point, Pakistan's approach in the post-bin Laden environment is now one of head-on opposition to the United States. Pakistan would like to see the negotiated departure of the United States in order to bring

Afghanistan under its sphere of influence and use it as a springboard into Central Asia. The Pakistani army's support for the Taliban isn't decreasing—to the contrary, actually—and Pakistan's opposition to direct U.S. actions (involving drones and CIA agents) largely limits the possibility of fighting the insurgency in Pakistan itself. In particular, Pakistani army offensives have had no impact on insurgents in border areas; if anything, the insurgents have grown stronger in recent months.⁴

Furthermore, military operations are not facilitating the diplomatic effort. The idea that pressuring the Taliban can force them to negotiate does not work because the counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy failed in the eyes of the population and the insurgents. In addition, the push in military operations has been met with a strong increase in the activities of the insurgents. In other terms, the current military operations are seen by the Pakistani military and the insurgents as a sign that there is no serious threat from the coalition. To the contrary, offensives are being carried out against the most nationalistic component of the Taliban in regions where foreign fighters are few and far between, while in regions experiencing significant penetration by transnational jihadist groups, the coalition presence is waning. In addition, unilateral American statements on maintaining bases in Afghanistan over the long term have hampered the opening of negotiations, given that the departure of U.S. troops is one of the central demands of Pakistan (and to a lesser degree, Iran). If relations with Pakistan continue to deteriorate, the Pakistani army could forego a negotiated settlement, fostering a Taliban military victory. The level of financial support

to the Pakistani army from the U.S. government is too limited to balance what is seen in Islamabad as a major strategic asset—dominance in Afghanistan.

On the ground, the consequences of the current policy are already being felt. With means that will stagnate or rapidly decrease in 2014, the coalition is in a fundamentally defensive position. No large-scale operation can be envisioned to wrest territory from the insurgency because, given the instability of the situation in Helmand and Kandahar, it is impossible to move troops from those two southern provinces. In fact, the coalition's decision to focus decisive efforts there gave free rein to the armed opposition of other regions, where the situation continues to deteriorate. Far from growing weaker, the insurgency is stronger. The lack of offensive operations should have led to a decrease in attacks and losses.⁵ The number of attacks against the coalition and coalition losses are about the same as in 2010.

To understand the current political dynamic in concrete terms, this study focuses on the provinces bordering Pakistan, which include two distinct political systems: The “Eastern Triangle” comprises the provinces of Kapisa, Laghman, Nuristan, Kunar, and Nangarhar and the district of Surobi. For the purposes of this text, Loya Paktia comprises the provinces of Paktia, Paktika, Logar, and Ghazni (solely the Pashtun part).⁶ Why these regions? First, because that is where the most aggressive players—various Taliban networks, such as those of Haqqani, Mansur, and Hezb-e-Islami, and various transnational groups such as al-Qaeda and the Lashkar-e-Taiba—are operating. Second, despite a lack of U.S. interest in these regions, their strategic importance is infinitely greater than that of Helmand or even Kandahar. The importance of the Eastern Triangle is due to its location between the capital and the Pakistani insurgent sanctuaries, and its importance in facilitating the passage of insurgents from Pakistan. As Joshua Foust notes, “Kapisa’s significance lies not in the presence of militants, who are not especially concentrated there, but in its role as a staging ground for attacks on Kabul. Since the 1980s, mujahideen commanders have considered the area to be of vital strategic importance, as it guards the entrance to the Panjshir Valley.”⁷ The district of Tagab was often used to organize attacks on Kabul,⁸ and the road between Jalalabad and Kabul is one of Afghanistan’s crucial economic arteries. In addition, the importance of Loya Paktia is related to the potential threat against the Kabul-Kandahar road, which goes through Jhazni and Logar provinces.

What are the main lessons that can be drawn from an analysis of these regions? First, the coalition and the Afghan government hold only isolated territories and, up to a certain point, the major roads. Coalition troops are prey to constant harassment, which makes it increasingly more difficult to move about; the Afghan government holds only the cities and district centers. In these circumstances, the withdrawal of Western forces would lead to a collapse of the entire security system. In addition, the insurgency can now mobilize

The withdrawal of Western forces would lead to a collapse of the entire security system.

hundreds of fighters for specific operations. This dynamic expansion is not limited to groups destined to remain local. Insurgents move more or less freely between Pakistan and areas near Kabul; border security is not guaranteed and will not be in the foreseeable future. Also, the territories under the control of insurgents form a sanctuary not only for the Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami, but also for transnational jihadist movements such as al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba. After ten years of war, Nuristan is the first province almost totally under the control of the armed opposition and is once again becoming a sanctuary for transnational jihadist groups.

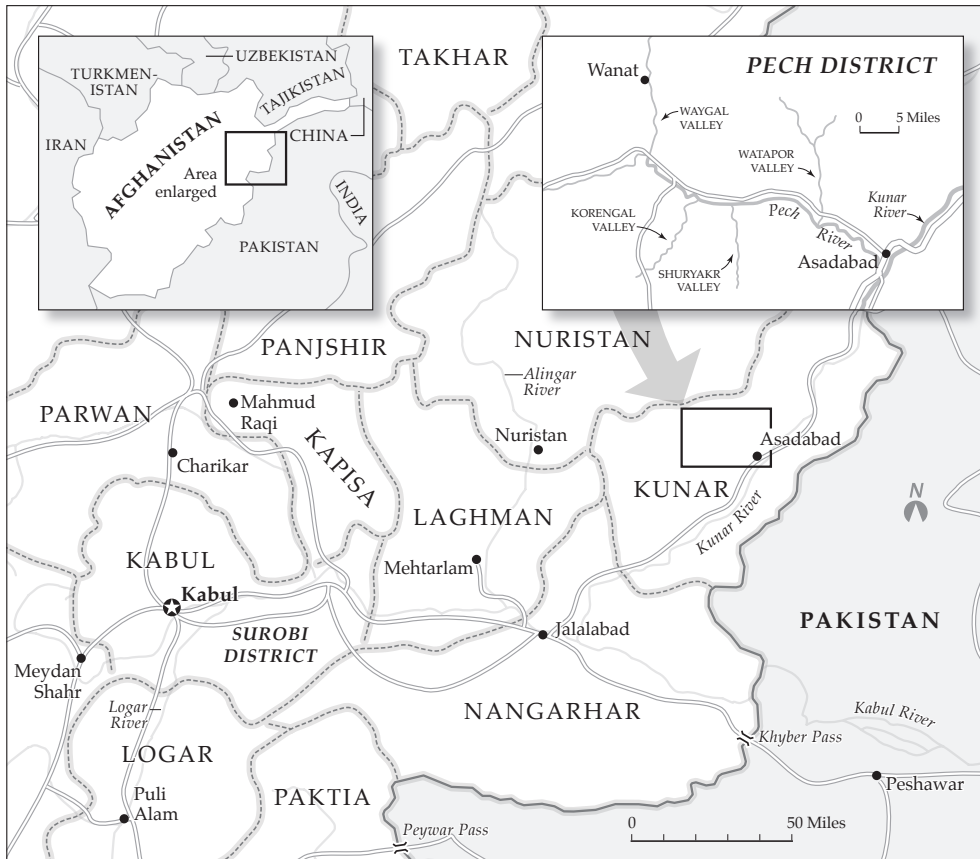
The Coalition's Shrunken Space

The coalition's military force was initially organized to control the passage of insurgents from Pakistan, secure major roads, and protect urban centers, notably the cities of Jalalabad and Kabul. In the Eastern Triangle, coalition forces are highly conditioned by geography: Coalition bases are laid out along valleys that are axes of both communication and population areas. In Loya Paktia, the major roads connecting the main urban centers trace the locations of coalition bases, but other factors, notably the tribal map, also define the political map.

The force was progressively strengthened over the years. In Kunar Province, the construction of a road along the left bank of the Kunar River (near the Pakistani border) and many bridges make it possible to intervene more swiftly against insurgents coming from Pakistan. Starting in 2006, the United States substantially increased the number of outposts in different valleys (Pech, Korengal, Waygal) and on the border (see below). In Kapisa, French forces carried out a series of offensives to clear the road between Tagab and Sarobi, after having had their convoys systematically blocked by insurgents. By summer 2011, the road should be paved and secured by Afghan National Army (ANA) posts. Operations in the Alasay Valley (Kapisa Province) are aimed at pushing the insurgents back toward the upper part of the valleys.⁹ Security was also stepped up on the Kabul-Jalalabad road. Insurgents operate most often out of Shahidan and Badpash, which explains why the government force was reinforced on that section of the road. By the same token, the valleys of Galuch and Hind Dor, 15 kilometers west of Mehtar Lam, were "cleared" for the third time this year. While the road is relatively secure as far as the border, the crossing through the Khyber Agency, in Pakistan, is complicated by the presence of armed Pakistani groups. In Loya Paktia, efforts have been made to strengthen security on the road leading from Kabul to Logar and toward Gardez, in Paktia Province.

Despite these efforts, the current force seems to be crumbling and does not provide sufficient protection for strategic roads and cities. In addition, there is no comprehensive plan for coordinating local security forces, even though it would be important to think of this region as a strategic whole. Insurgents move freely among Kunar, Laghman, and Nuristan and, farther south, among

Eastern Triangle



Eastern Afghanistan



Paktika, Khost, and Paktia. Coalition outposts are neither front lines nor barriers to insurgent movement, but islands that are becoming the focal point of insurgents' attacks. In addition, the border is largely open to insurgents, and the American outposts in the region of Kunar do not significantly slow the insurgents' passage between Pakistan and Afghanistan. The Afghan border is also almost entirely open in the province of Nangarhar all the way to Zabul, with the exception of the district of Jaji Maydan (in Khost Province). Across the border, Pakistani army operations in the Bajaur Agency and South Waziristan have had no notable effect on the Taliban presence. Finally, the recent reorganization of U.S. forces in Kunar and Nuristan has led to an insurgent advance.

The coalition controls less and less territory because the entire force is becoming binary, with established bases on the one hand and special operations on the other. . . . The bases are isolated and have little contact with the population.

The fact is, the force was too dispersed, and local opposition—the population was allied with the insurgents—led the American command to evacuate the most isolated valleys (Korengal and Waygal) as well as certain border outposts.¹⁰ As a result, fighting shifted to the Pech Valley, where the United States also evacuated its bases, and is intensifying throughout the rest of Kunar.¹¹

The insurgency is also making gains south and south-east of the Kabul-Jalalabad road, including the Azrah district in Logar and the Musayi district in Kabul Province.

The insurgency has now penetrated certain regions a few dozen kilometers from the capital, and its Pakistani sanctuary is less than 100 kilometers away. Areas that had previously been pro-government, notably the districts of Sarobi and Khaki Jabbar,¹² do not have a large enough police or military force to oppose Taliban penetration. If anything, tribal structures are weakening and are incapable of resisting pressure from the insurgency.¹³ South of Jalalabad, the Khogyani district is totally Taliban (and harbors a large opium market). The fact that the Musayi district is largely penetrated by the Taliban, which have established themselves in the Logar and Wardak provinces, presents an emerging threat to the city of Kabul. Furthermore, in Loya Paktia, insurgents control most of the border areas, particularly in Paktika, and the coalition has only nominal control over the rural areas.

The coalition controls less and less territory because the entire force is becoming binary, with established bases on the one hand and special operations on the other. This system was designed to be complementary, with the bases providing a stable presence, with patrols to hold populated areas, and Special Operations eliminating insurgency leaders. However, in the current context, it mostly has a perverse effect in that the bases are isolated and have little contact with the population. Often the Taliban can come very close to coalition positions during the night, and they regularly fire rockets at the bases. These operations have only slight military value, but they make the population feel the presence of the insurgents. Special Forces operate among local populations that are generally under Taliban control, which places the coalition in

the position of “security provider,” particularly in the case of civilian losses. The situation is all the more unstable insofar as other aspects of the coalition’s efforts—tribal engagement, popular support, and partnership with the Afghan state—have not succeeded.

The Population’s Support

The population was initially favorable to the coalition, outside of areas that experienced the Taliban defeat as a reversal of ethnic balances—for example, in regions where Pashtun-Tajik or Safi-Pashai rifts are strong—or where the disgrace of influential local leaders is perceived as an injustice. People were tired of the heavy presence of the Pakistani intelligence agency (Inter-Services Intelligence, or ISI), the puritanism of the Taliban, and their opposition to tribal practices. The coalition was therefore able to move freely until 2003–2004, even in the most far-flung valleys of Nuristan. The coalition then progressively lost its political capital. Today, there is widespread hostility toward the foreign troop presence, even among Afghans ideologically opposed to the Taliban. Initially, tensions stemmed from the behavior of foreign troops, but the Afghan government’s lack of credibility is now an equally significant factor. The coalition has made progress in rectifying at least some of its mistakes, but the negative perceptions endure and are fueled by Taliban propaganda.

Afghans regularly criticize the attitude of coalition troops during certain operations. Searches of homes, for instance, particularly at night, are considered attacks on family honor. In Kunar, traffic on the Asadabad-Jalalabad road is a source of friction because of the delays caused by U.S. convoys and the sometimes aggressive behavior of soldiers. Some serious incidents have compromised the credibility of the United States and its local allies.¹⁴ In addition, prisoners are sometimes sent to Bagram for interrogation in secret U.S. army prisons, in some cases for months. Finally, civilian casualties are a continuing source of outrage, as in the case of the nine children killed in the Pech Valley in March 2011. And there is no convincing solution for these recurrent tensions: The operations undertaken to establish relationships with the population (such as village visits by Human Terrain Teams) are perceived—probably not without reason—as aimed mainly at gathering intelligence.

The coalition’s biggest mistake was to become involved in local power struggles. As it happens, many arrests are based on denunciations that are actually a settling of accounts by different communities. The Korengal Valley had been open to American troops until 2004, for example, when the United States made the mistake of getting involved in a local conflict. Korengal competed with the Pech Valley in logging (the wood often sent illegally to Pakistan). Notables of the Pech Valley, in an effort to discredit Haji Matin, a leader in Korengal, convinced U.S. forces that he was working for the Taliban. The consequences were

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disastrous: The United States bombed the house of Haji Matin, who turned to the Taliban.¹⁵ The Korengal Valley became the bloodiest area of the Afghan theater for U.S. forces, who finally had to evacuate their outpost in 2008. By the same token, the Shinwaris, at first favorable to the United States, went over to the opposition as a result of manipulation by another tribal group. The explanation that local populations are xenophobic is inadequate, as the American troops initially received a warm welcome and one would also have to explain the population's acceptance of hundreds of foreign fighters in these areas.

One initiative aimed at gaining the population's support was the establishment of development programs. As an American officer puts it: "We've seen it everywhere else, where once we've built roads through some of these valleys and we built bridges that connect population areas, the economics just go through the roof and now you get people above bare subsistence living

In reality, the effect of aid on security can only be marginal because it does not significantly strengthen state structures and most of the district capitals are practically without means.

where they're susceptible to enemy influences, get them to where they care about starting a small business, selling excess commodities, and getting to secondary and tertiary markets."¹⁶ For a while, Kunar Province was hailed as an example of the use of development aid as an instrument of counterinsurgency. Thus, beginning in 2005–2006, the officers in charge of the region launched a counterinsurgency program that is interesting both for its theoretical approach and its results.¹⁷ If we follow David Kilcullen,

in the face of a politically fragmented opposition and in a tribal region, the strategy adopted was to use the construction of a road between Jalalabad and Asadabad as a means of signing agreements with local tribes and marginalizing the most aggressive (non-local) fighters, who came from Pakistan. Kilcullen explains that the remarkable successes of this strategy can be applied elsewhere. Certain provinces, notably Kunar and Khost, received a massive infusion of American credits through Provincial Reconstruction Teams (PRTs). Those two provinces had the largest PRT budgets in 2008–2009: \$80–90 million apiece.¹⁸ Numerous development projects have been put in place in the Kunar Valley since the 1980s, particularly irrigation projects and roadwork (embankments built by PRTs). The PRT of Gardez, the first established in Afghanistan, spends tens of millions of dollars each year on infrastructure projects.¹⁹

What is the impact on security? In reality, there is no proven correlation or simple causality between aid levels and security.²⁰ Experience shows that in the most stable places, there are regions that have not received aid, or very little, and that regions that have received the most aid are often very unstable. As a general rule, the "proposal of aid/establishment of *shuras*/resolution of conflicts/support for the government" model does not work. In the case of Kunar, despite Kilcullen's misleading assessment, the situation actually deteriorated rapidly after 2008. With no possible control over the border with Pakistan, the infiltration of militants continued freely. In those circumstances, it was hard

for the tribes to dissociate themselves from the insurgency, should they have wished to do so.²¹ In reality, the effect of aid on security can only be marginal because it does not significantly strengthen state structures and most of the district capitals are practically without means.

The Afghan Government

In key areas defended by the coalition, the state of the ANA and Afghan police forces makes the transition impossible. In reality, ANA forces are not autonomous and are generally unmotivated; they are not equipped to detect mines and have no air support, which makes them unable to leave their bases.²² In regions where the Taliban are clearly dominant—Nuristan, Kunar, North Laghman, Paktika—the Taliban do not necessarily want to take the district capitals but are waiting for the Western withdrawal. In the Alisay district (and the valley), there is an implicit but clear agreement between insurgents and government forces, which have reached a ceasefire. The same thing can be seen in the Pech Valley and the high valleys of Laghman.²³ In Loya Paktia, the map shows that the areas held at least partially by the government are now extremely limited. The only districts where the government enjoys relative support are Jaji Maydan and, south of Khost, Gurbuz and Tani.

Aside from security institutions, we are witnessing the progressive “deconstruction” of the state, at least in cases where institutions were initially working. This was not always the case, but the functioning of certain institutions is increasingly disconnected from the political control of populations. Thus, the National Solidarity Programme (NSP), clinics, and schools are operating in rather large areas, often outside of government control. In practice, the Taliban impose certain conditions—for example, teachers must be local in order to avoid spying—but they support programs that strengthen their acceptance by the population. Likewise, nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), which increasingly work with Afghans, often enter into explicit or implicit agreements with the armed opposition.

The regime enjoys no more support within the population because corruption makes it impossible for people to identify in any way with the regime. Furthermore, the weakness of the structures in place (for months, Kapisa has had no governor) and the fact that the government can hardly intervene outside of district capitals largely limits its relevance in daily life. Skyrocketing opium production in certain border provinces—particularly Nangarhar, Badakhshan, and Kunar—is another sign of the lack of government control.

The only supporters of the government today are largely independent local powers: border tribes that are protecting their contraband trade and former commanders from the 1980s. These alliances are unstable and are not contributing to the stabilization of the political situation. An increasingly autonomous

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periphery and the return of former commanders to positions of strength is in fact a nationwide phenomenon (see Herat and Mazar-i Sharif). Former commanders continue to be major players in the political game, notably when it comes to government support. For example, in Jalalabad, an alliance of notables, all former commanders, wants to get rid of the current governor, Gul Agha Sherzai, who is accused of not distributing profits fairly.²⁴ Opium production, which has risen significantly in districts south of the city, is probably increasing competition among the networks.

Former conflicts between Jamaat-e-Islami and Hezb-e-Islami are generally no longer relevant; tensions usually have an ethnic basis or relate to disputes over the sharing of economic benefits. Political affiliations with Jamiat or Hezb-e-Islami, which cut across ethnic lines, now tend to be less important than the opposition between the Pashtun Taliban and Tajik Jamiat. From an ethnic perspective, the Safis more often support the insurgents while the Pashai are more generally on the side of the government (as members of the Special Forces, for example). Thus, in Laghman, deputies are often elected by the Pashai.²⁵ Meanwhile, in Kapisa, the Pashtuns resent the current organization, which they feel benefits the Panjshiris and the Tajiks in general. One of the Taliban demands, in fact, is the redistricting of the province to give it a Pashtun majority.

Tribal Engagement

The formation of tribal militias has been a counterinsurgency strategy since 2008. Several commentators and strategists have made it a popular theme. Seth Jones wants to support a Pashtun revolt against the Taliban.²⁶ Journalist Fareed Zakaria wants to significantly increase the number of tribal militias,²⁷ as does analyst Fred Kaplan.²⁸ Major Jim Gant theorized about the use of tribes in his essay “One Tribe at a Time,” which is based on a largely contrived narrative of his experience in Kunar.²⁹ But these ideas have no solid basis in fact; the comparison with Iraq makes no sense, and the results have been particularly disastrous. The U.S. army doesn’t have enough expertise to play the tribal game and the logical consequence of supporting tribes or clans is a weakening of the state structure, which is especially counterproductive in a potential transition.

For example, in Nangarhar Province, the two largest tribes, the Shinwari and the Mohmand, live along the road leading to the Pakistani border, and they control a large part of both legal and illegal trade with Pakistan. The Shinwari also have control over heroin labs. Yet in early 2010, an agreement between a Shinwari clan from Nangarhar and the United States, reached without consulting the Afghan government, was supposed to bring an end to poppy cultivation and drug labs while fighting corruption and the Taliban, in exchange for \$1 million.³⁰ In fact, the United States was supporting a clan, the Shobli, who promptly used the American support to attack another clan. That clan, the Ali Sher Khel,³¹ it turns out, had good relations with the governor

of the province, Gul Agha Shirzai. The clan complained about having been marginalized by the United States. Shirzai in turn criticized the U.S. initiative. Furthermore, in Loya Paktia, the Azizullah militia near Urgun is still a major cause of the coalition's weakening. In a majority Pashtun region, this Tajik leader was accused on several occasions of terrorizing Waziri tribes that are locally in the majority.³²

The Insurgency

Over the past two years, the security situation has deteriorated in every district of the border provinces. As far as we can tell, the population's expectations are generally negative, given that the current government is hardly credible and, according to our interlocutors, a withdrawal of coalition forces will result in the collapse of the ANA.³³ Pressure from the insurgency should increase in all border provinces as the coalition carries out its withdrawal. Three things should be considered here: the relations among the different armed groups; the objectives and tactics of the insurgents; and the formation of a sanctuary for transnational groups.

The Modus Vivendi Between the Different Groups

The political map of the border provinces, particularly in the Eastern Triangle, is less homogeneous than in the South. Yet these various movements divide areas of influence among themselves without dispute—a marked difference from the 1980s. It is therefore unlikely that the coalition will be able to neutralize these groups by playing on their differences, at least not without a radical change in the political game. Historically, the Eastern Triangle is marked by the strong presence of Hezb-e-Islami, notably in Kunar, Kapisa, and Laghman. In the 1990s there were recurrent clashes with the Jamiat-e Islami, particularly in Kapisa and Laghman, when the Shura-e nazar (headed by Ahmad Shah Massoud) pushed its advantage farther south to marginalize Hezb-e-Islami. Because of its historical presence, Hezb-e-Islami still enjoys influence, but it is declining and the Taliban has become the dominant force.

Nowadays the insurgency is dominated by the Taliban, Hezb-e-Islami, and, in Kunar and Nuristan, Lashkar-e-Taiba and al-Qaeda. In Loya Paktia, the political map is simpler: Most of the groups refer to themselves as Taliban, within which one can distinguish the Haqqani and Mansur groups, while others are more directly linked to the Balochistan-based Quetta Shura.

The Articulation of Objectives and Tactics

The armed opposition employs a combination of three types of tactics: harassment to isolate coalition bases (notably through the use of improvised explosive devices [IEDs]); targeted assassinations (generally suicide attacks); and massive

attacks to conquer positions when the strength ratio is favorable. First, contrary to what the coalition sometimes asserts, the use of targeted strikes, particularly suicide attacks, does not reveal the movement's weakening or radicalization. To the contrary, it reveals the mastery of an effective mode of operation, especially when the army has been infiltrated (see the April 16, 2011 incident in Laghman Province in which five coalition soldiers and four Afghan soldiers were killed on a military base).³⁴ The psychological impact of such attacks is particularly significant. Second, in isolated districts, the armed opposition has launched massive attacks, sometimes drawing several hundred men. This indicates that the insurgency can mobilize combatants well beyond the attacked targets. In the valleys of Waygal and Korengal, now in opposition hands, several hundred men

Afghans who work for NGOs and government civil servants are regularly threatened and are not able to live in or even return to their villages.

were involved in attacks. Likewise, in October 2009, 350 Taliban fighters attacked two bases in the Kamdesh district (Nuristan Province), and the American forces withdrew several days later. In July 2008, several hundred fighters killed nine American soldiers during an assault on Wanat, which U.S. troops evacuated a few days later.³⁵ The method most frequently used against coalition forces to disrupt troop movements and erode morale is harassment by IEDs.

The lack of a truly effective technical solution to counter IEDs explains why they are the cause of a majority of coalition losses.

The border provinces, being close to Pakistan, were among the first to free themselves of the Soviet presence in the 1980s. The insurgency leaders are probably taking into account the current situation in reference to that period. The insurgency's objective is to isolate the coalition through constant harassment; to weaken the Afghan government by direct attacks against the police, army, and notables; and more specifically to these regions, to take isolated outposts or neutralize them through local agreements in order to expand their sanctuary.

Control over the population—a major objective for the insurgents—is carried out through intimidation, propaganda, and the offer of services. First, notables close to the coalition and civil servants (particularly police officers), who represent a potential threat because they are honest or well integrated locally, are systematically targeted by insurgents. In the district of Asmar (Kunar Province), Malik Zarin, one of the notables of the Mashwani tribe, and ten other notables were killed in a suicide attack in April 2011, showing yet again how hard it is to protect notables who agree to work with the coalition. Insurgents who might be tempted to rally to the government cannot remain in their villages; if they go over to the government side they must leave, which considerably limits the impact of such a gesture. It is therefore unsurprising that for the time being, no such movement in favor of the government is evident in the border provinces. Afghans who work for NGOs and government civil servants are regularly threatened and are not able to live in or even return to their villages.

Second, propaganda, facilitated by the coalition's mistakes, discredits both the government and the coalition. The Taliban attend the funerals of *shahids* (martyrs) to mobilize the population. Pamphlets are left in parks in Jalalabad and Taliban radio stations broadcast in certain valleys. One pamphlet shows an American soldier touching a woman, accompanied by the caption: "Will you let that happen?"

Third, the insurgents have a parallel justice system that functions relatively well, even in cases of intertribal conflict. In Kunar, the Gujjar tribe had a disagreement with another tribe over wood in Marid, in the Ghaziabad district. The government failed to resolve the case, as did Malek Zarin (since assassinated). The Taliban, though, succeeded in imposing an agreement, both because the judgment seemed impartial and because they had the military means to enforce it. The Taliban often impose considerable fines or even burn down the houses of those who don't obey. Near Tagab (Kapisa Province), the Taliban also have a justice system and provide services to the population. If certain accounts can be believed, it would appear that the Taliban are more organized today than before the arrival of French troops in 2008. There is greater stringency in the organization of insurgents and a greater ascendancy over society that can be explained by the now duly discredited Afghan government. Unlike in the 1990s, the Taliban are relatively flexible in cases of conflict with the local population. The locals can place limits on insurgent actions, for example, refusing to allow schools to become targets of the insurgents (as in the Kunar Valley) or when some 40 policemen were taken hostage by the Taliban in late March 2011 in Chapa Dara and then released on the demand of local notables.

Sanctuary and Transnational Networks

The final aspect of the insurgency's actions in the east is the presence of transnational jihadist groups in the border regions. Al-Qaeda, in particular, has returned to Afghanistan and is cooperating with the Taliban on individual operations, as demonstrated by the fact that it was an al-Qaeda militant, Abdul Ghani, who organized the suicide attack that killed Haji Malik.³⁶ Lashkar-e-Taiba has long been present in Nuristan and Kunar and, less obviously, in Nangarhar Province, in the district of Khogiani.³⁷ In any case, the area now represents a rather secure sanctuary capable of welcoming important leaders in the future, which would be a symbolic coup.³⁸

The presence of these groups is facilitated by the long-term ideological transformation in Afghanistan. For several decades, the Salafist religious movement has made itself felt in the border provinces, breaking with the dominant interpretation of Islam in Afghanistan (including that held by the Taliban). This reformist movement is not limited to the Pashtun regions and largely transcends ethnic barriers. Thus, in Badakhshan Province, whose population is mainly Tajik and Uzbek, a strong Salafist/Tablighi movement has been

established. This probably explains at least in part why Badakhshan does not hinder Taliban groups moving through northern Panjshir toward Baghlan and Kunduz. The Salafist movement has had a voice in the provinces of Kunar and Nuristan since the 1980s, with the development of political groups that formed an emirate in the 1980s independent of other Afghan political movements. The local population and other Afghan political parties, notably Hezb-e-Islami, put a brutal end to that experience, but the historical implantation of this movement explains the openness of these regions to forms of radical reform, particularly among the Nuristanis.

But their presence is also an effect of military operations in Pakistan and the deterioration of relations between the ISI and certain radical groups. During Pakistani army operations in Swat, many fighters took refuge in Nuristan

Because Lashkar-e-Taiba's involvement in the 2008 Mumbai attacks made it difficult to remain in Pakistan, Afghanistan serves as a sanctuary from which the movement can organize attacks in Pakistan or even against India.

and Kunar. Lashkar-e-Taiba has been connected with the Afghan jihad from the very beginning, even though it primarily recruits Punjabis, and its establishment in the border regions has been bolstered by its growing association with the Pakistani Tahrir-e Taliban. In addition, because Lashkar-e-Taiba's involvement in the 2008 Mumbai attacks made it difficult to remain in Pakistan, Afghanistan serves as a sanctuary from which the movement can organize attacks in Pakistan or even against India.

One element here is particularly important: The "Arabs" (foreign fighters) are here in greater numbers than in the 1990s because many have married into local families, notably from the Nuristanis in Kamdesh. Earlier tensions in their relationships with Afghan parties (the Taliban and Hezb-e-Islami) seem to have eased, with shared territories and regular *shuras* (consultations) to resolve disagreements. Moreover, their cooperation appears to be real, as demonstrated by the fact that al-Qaeda seems to have been responsible for the suicide attack that killed Malik Zarin, the pro-government tribal leader.

What is the impact of this presence? The establishment of a sanctuary in the east changes the relationship with Pakistan. It presents the Pakistani army with an important problem to deal with, but it is one that the coalition cannot solve or even help solve. From this standpoint, the coalition's priority operations are in the south, an area in which the Taliban presents no threat to the Pakistani government. Areas where Pakistani-U.S. cooperation would make sense, that is, in the east, have been abandoned. On a larger level, for the first time, it seems that this sanctuary is having an impact on the Pakistani situation. Afghanistan is a sanctuary for militants directly attacking the Pakistani army. In other words, the crisis on both sides of the border is growing, and the evacuation of Western security forces from the Afghan side limits the capacity for negotiation with the Pakistanis.³⁹

Conclusion: The Missing Link

The aims of America's war in Afghanistan have not always been very clearly defined, either for Americans or Afghans. An original objective was to drive the Taliban from power; today, the Taliban are considered the lesser of other evils. Mistakes in executing the war, for example, taking sides in intertribal disputes, have turned public opinion against the foreign troop presence—even among Afghans who originally welcomed U.S. troops and who remain ideologically against the Taliban.

There is now consensus in Washington that, at the very least, the coalition must keep Afghanistan off-limits to jihadist groups that could organize attacks against Western nations or India. Yet the coalition is preoccupied with operations in the south, where groups such as al-Qaeda and Lashkar-e-Taiba have practically no presence whatsoever.

At the same time, the coalition seems indifferent toward the evolving situation in the Eastern Triangle. What happens in that strategically critical region between Kabul and Pakistan, however, could determine the outcome of the coalition's efforts to stabilize the country and transfer security responsibilities to the Afghan army in 2014. The most aggressive insurgent players and transnational jihadist groups are increasingly operating there with impunity. Their activities present three dangerous and interrelated consequences:

- **Expanding a sanctuary open to the most radical groups from Pakistan.** The sanctuary is almost certain to grow in the years to come. That makes unlikely, and even dangerous, the idea that counterterrorism operations will be enough in the long term to neutralize these groups.
- **Weakening capacity for negotiation with Pakistan.** The inefficient and corrupt Afghan government has been largely discredited. Meanwhile, and particularly since the U.S. military raid that killed Osama bin Laden and embarrassed the Pakistani government, Pakistan will put more pressure on the coalition to ensure it does not lose its Taliban asset.
- **Posing a military threat to Kabul.** With the possibility of fighting the insurgency in Pakistan out of the question, and with the inevitable expansion of the sanctuary just over the border in Afghanistan, the capital itself becomes vulnerable.

The Taliban have proven themselves resourceful, opportunistic, and patient. A Taliban military victory is now quite possible, given the announced U.S. withdrawal and the dysfunction of the Afghan state. Negotiations with the

Mistakes have turned public opinion against the foreign troop presence—even among Afghans who originally welcomed U.S. troops and who remain ideologically against the Taliban.

Taliban leadership for a political resolution are far more preferable. Having a stake in a coalition government would bring the Taliban inside the tent and might offer the last, best opportunity to isolate more radical groups.

Notes

- 1 Other actors within the American government favor negotiations, but for the time being, it is the U.S. army that defines the policy on the ground.
- 2 Probably at the level of several thousand strikes.
- 3 The police are largely ineffective. The number of police officers is supposed to be increased to 134,000 in fall 2011, but the exact number of officers at the present time is not known; see SIGAR (Office of the Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction), "Despite Improvements in MoI's Personnel Systems, Additional Actions Are Needed to Completely Verify ANP Payroll Costs and Workforce Strength," April 25, 2011, www.sigar.mil/pdf/audits/SIGAR%20Audit-11-10.pdf.
- 4 See pages 17 and 18 of the *UNCLASS Report on Afghanistan and Pakistan* (March 2011) presented to the U.S. Congress, <http://abcnews.go.com/images/Politics/UNCLASS%20Report%20on%20Afghanistan%20and%20Pakistan.pdf>.
- 5 In March 2011, the number of attacks had reached a record high of 440. "Insurgent Attacks Hit Records Last Month," *TOLONews.com*, April 24, 2011, www.tolonews.com/en/afghanistan/2500-insurgent-attacks-hit-records-last-month.
- 6 With respect to Badakhshan Province, the only aspect being considered is its relationship with the border regions farther south.
- 7 See Joshua Foust's study on the counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy in Kapisa. Joshua Foust, "Kapisa Province: A COIN Case Study in Afghanistan," *World Politics Review*, March 31, 2009, www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/3532/kapisa-province-a-coin-case-study-in-afghanistan.
- 8 Tagab served as staging area for attacks on Kabul. See Matt DuPee, "Kapisa Province: The Taliban's Gateway to Kabul," *Long War Journal*, April 29, 2008, www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2008/04/kapisa_province_the.php.
- 9 See Navid Waqif, "Clashes Displace Thousands in Kapisa," *Pajhwok Afghan News*, April 14, 2011, www.pajhwok.com/en/2011/04/14/clashes-displace-thousands-kapisa.
- 10 U.S. forces withdrew from the Korengal Valley in April 2010. Elizabeth Rubin, "Battle Company Is Out There," *New York Times Magazine*, February 24, 2008, www.nytimes.com/2008/02/24/magazine/24afghanistan-t.html?pagewanted=1.
- 11 See in particular Capt. Jonathan Springer, "ANA Assumes Responsibility of FOB Blessing," Defense Video and Imagery Distribution System, March 10, 2011, www.dvidshub.net/news/66814/ana-assumes-responsibility-fob-blessing. Also see Ahmad Waheed and Bill Roggio, "Taliban Lay Siege to a District in Nuristan," *Long War Journal*, July 18, 2010, www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2010/07/taliban_storm_distri.php.

- 12 The presence of anti-Taliban leaders in Hisarak and Jagdalek, notably Jamiat commander Anwar and Afghan Mellat leader Ahadi, was advantageous for the Kabul government.
- 13 Said Hasan (of the Karokhel tribe) is the dominant khan; his tribe straddles the districts of Sarobi (south) and Khak-e Jabar (south Kabul). He is the heir of a family of notables connected with Zaher but is politically distant from Daud, which explains his affiliation with Mahaz at the beginning of the war. This tribe gained political renown during the war by blowing up the power line supplying Kabul in 1983. Some of the tribe's 5,000 members living in exile in Pakistan have not returned to Afghanistan.
- 14 For example, in 2003, after an attack against an American base in the Gandjgal Valley, Abdul Wali, suspected of being responsible for the attack, agreed to give an account of the incident. He was accompanied by the son of the provincial governor, Hyder Akbar. He died of torture inflicted by a CIA contractor, Dave Passaro. See Said Hyder Akbar and Susan Burton, *Come Back to Afghanistan: A California Teenager's Story* (New York: Bloomsbury USA, 2005).
- 15 Michael Moore and James Fussel, *Kunar and Nuristan: Rethinking U.S. Counterinsurgency Operations*, Afghanistan Report no. 1, Institute for the Study of War, 2009, www.understandingwar.org/report/kunar-and-nuristan, 20.
- 16 U.S. Army Combat Studies Institute, "Wanat: Combat Action in Afghanistan, 2008" (Fort Leavenworth, Kansas: Combat Studies Institute Press, 2010), note 76, see www.scribd.com/doc/51573119/23/The-Withdrawal-from-the-Waygal-Valley.
- 17 David Kilcullen, "Taliban and Counter-insurgency in Kunar," in *Decoding the New Taliban: Insights from the Afghan Field*, edited by Antonio Giustozzi (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), 243.
- 18 See "Germany: Visit of Junar and Wardak Governors Helps Advance Our Afghan Agenda," cable sent from the U.S. Embassy in Berlin to the Office of the Secretary of Defense and U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, December 19, 2008, www.thepressproject.gr/cablegate/details.php?id=67298.
- 19 PRTs sometimes do poor quality work: Two bridges over the Kunar collapsed because their foundations were not deep enough, and costs skyrocketed in the case of school construction. Cooperation with local nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) leaves a lot to be desired (the NGO Madera, for example, sells animal vaccines while the Kunar PRT gives them out for free). To read about the various scandals reported in the construction of the Gardez-Khost road, see Alissa J. Rubin and James Risen, "Costly Afghanistan Road Project Is Marred by Unsavory Alliances," *New York Times*, May 1, 2011, www.nytimes.com/2011/05/01/world/asia/01road.html?_r=1.
- 20 It is interesting to note the lack of systematic studies on the impact of PRTs on district and provincial security.
- 21 Bing West also criticized Kilcullen's approach.
- 22 We are not commenting here on the Afghan Local Police (ALP) program, because it is still quite new and its effects are hard to gauge; most likely, the impact will be local and not strategic.
- 23 See Maiwand Safi, "War's a Farce in Afghan Truce Village," *Asia Times*, March 31, 2011, www.atimes.com/atimes/South_Asia/MC31Df03.html. Also see Joshua Foust, "What Really Happened in the Tagab Valley? A Response to Second Lieutenant James Parker," *Small Wars Journal*, September 24, 2009, <http://small-warsjournal.com/blog/journal/docs-temp/297-foust.pdf>.

- 24 Hazrat Ali, a Pashai from the Dara-i Nur Valley near Shura-e nazar; Haji Zaher, son of Haji Qader, who was assassinated in 2002 in Kabul; and Engineer Ghaffur, a former member of Hezb-e-Islami (and still a member of the legal party) want Shirzai to step down so they can regain economic and financial control, as he wasn't sharing profits. In response, Gul Agha Shirzai reunited representatives of the provincial districts that support him. He also has the support of certain Mohmand and Shinwari clans.
- 25 Laghman's Pashai community is thus opposed to the Safi, who are pro-Taliban.
- 26 Seth Jones, "Path to a Pashtun Rebellion in Afghanistan," *Washington Post*, October 2, 2009, http://voices.washingtonpost.com/shortstack/2009/10/the_path_to_a_pashtun_rebellio.html.
- 27 Fareed Zakaria, "The Way Out of Afghanistan," *Newsweek*, September 12, 2009, www.newsweek.com/2009/09/11/the-way-out-of-afghanistan.html.
- 28 Fred Kaplan, "All Politics Is Tribal: Obama's Afghanistan Strategy Should Team Our Soldiers With Their Militias," *Slate*, November 23, 2009, www.slate.com/id/2235472.
- 29 Personal message from Shahm Mahmood Miakhel, director of the United States Institute of Peace (USIP), Kabul, April 2011. See also Gant, *One Tribe at a Time* (Los Angeles, CA: Nine Sisters Imports, 2009).
- 30 See Rick Rowley and Jason Motlagh's documentary, "Million Dollar Militia," September 2010. Niaiz and Usman are two notables who are supported by the United States. See <http://english.aljazeera.net/programmes/peopleandpower/2010/09/201091142034452109.html>.
- 31 Malik Usman formed a militia with members of his clan (the Shobli), whose relations with the Ali Sher Khel clan are characterized by conflict, particularly over construction on contested land.
- 32 See Julius Cavendish, "Revealed: Afghan Chief Accused of Campaign of Terror Is on U.S. Payroll," *Independent*, March 18, 2011, www.independent.co.uk/news/world/asia/revealed-afghan-chief-accused-of-campaign-of-terror-is-on-us-payroll-2245369.html. Biography of Azizullah and site of operations: www.afghan-bios.info/index.php?option=com_afghanbios&id=2032&task=view&total=2043&start=272&Itemid=2.
- 33 The price of a Kalashnikov, a good indicator of the demand for security and expectations, is now \$900 to \$1,200 in Kunar. That historic high can be explained by strong demand (the northern regions have become heavily armed in recent years) by insurgents as well as individuals who fear for their safety.
- 34 An insurgent wearing an ANA uniform killed the soldiers in a suicide attack for which the Taliban claimed responsibility. See Maria Abi-Habib and Walid Fazly, "Taliban Suicide Bombers Kill Eight Coalition Troops," *Wall Street Journal*, April 17, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748704621304576266480722127912.html>.
- 35 Bill Roggio, "Taliban 'Have Control of Another District in Eastern Afghanistan,'" *Long War Journal*, October 10, 2009, www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2009/10/taliban_have_control.php#ixzz1IF7aeJzs.
- 36 See RTT News, "NATO: Senior Al-Qaeda Leader Killed in Afghan Air Strike," April 26, 2011, www.rttnews.com/Content/MarketSensitiveNews.aspx?Id=1605985&SM=1.

- 37 See, for example, Anirudh Bhattacharyya, "LeT Threat to Coalition Forces in Afghanistan," *Hindustan Times*, July 5, 2010, www.hindustantimes.com/LeT-threat-to-coalition-forces-in-Afghanistan/Article1-567488.aspx. Also, Alissa J. Rubin, "Militant Group Expands Attacks in Afghanistan," *New York Times*, June 15, 2010, www.nytimes.com/2010/06/16/world/asia/16lashkar.html; and "Analyzing the Effect of Lashkar-e-Taiba on the Afghan Insurgency," *Strategic Discourse*, June 16, 2010, <http://strategic-discourse.com/2010/06/analyzing-the-effect-of-lashkar-e-taiba-on-the-afghan-insurgency>. And Stephen Tankel, "Lashkar-e-Taiba in Perspective: An Evolving Threat," New America Foundation, February 2010, www.newamerica.net/sites/newamerica.net/files/policydocs/tankel.pdf.
- 38 See Mary Slosson, "Al Qaeda Returns to Afghanistan," Annenberg School for Communication and Journalism, University of Southern California, www.neon-tommy.com/news/2011/04/al-qaeda-returns-afghanistan.
- 39 See, for example, Tara McKelvey, "A Return to Hell in Swat," *Foreign Policy*, March 2, 2011. Also, Seth Jones and C. Christine Fair, *Counterinsurgency in Pakistan* (Santa Monica, Calif.: Rand Corporation, 2010), www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG982.html.

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