



## Bullets over Kabul's Broadway

On the bright and breezy Sunday morning of April 15, 2012, my colleagues and I left NATO's International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) headquarters in Kabul to meet with Afghan journalists, government officials, and civil society leaders to discuss the security and political situation in Afghanistan and the transition to a much reduced international presence after 2014. For once, I was participating in an official, NATO-sponsored trip of five researchers, whom NATO called "opinion leaders," from the United States, Europe, and Australia.

After several days under NATO auspices, I would stay on in Afghanistan and travel around the country on my own, as I did on previous trips—continuing my research, unencumbered by formal security restrictions and free to interact with many different Afghan interlocutors. This book, in its policy analysis and personal reflections, is based to a large extent on that fieldwork in Afghanistan and recounts some of my experiences that are emblematic of the political and social contentions, violent struggles, and mafia rule with which Afghanistan is grappling on the cusp of the new post-2014 situation, when most Western soldiers will have departed. Many Afghans fear this impending change, even as they are tired of Western presence in their land.

My analysis is well introduced by what transpired on that day, April 15, as we met or were affected by the behavior of many of the types of actors that have Afghanistan's future in their hands. The experience would turn out to be a micro example of what life in Afghanistan after a decade of Western intervention has become: a combination of social

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progress, an uncertain and worrisome economic outlook, politics and intrigue, violence by insurgents and terrorists, and fighting back by Afghan security forces.

One of the brightest developments in Afghanistan since 2002 has been the growth of vibrant media in Afghanistan, which increasingly have been able to expose government corruption, abuses by power brokers, and the brutality of the Taliban; challenge oppressive but deeply ingrained social mores; and seek greater accountability for the Afghan people. Yet the morning meeting with Afghan journalists, even though carefully supervised by Afghan government officials, revealed not only the life-threatening pressures that Afghan journalists face from Afghanistan's armed groups and power brokers but also the increasing effort by the Afghan government to undermine and muzzle independent media and other critics of its rule.<sup>1</sup> Moreover, since many independent media outlets in Afghanistan are still fundamentally dependent on Western financial support for their economic survival, the likely decrease in Western funding after 2014 could severely hamper their ability to challenge those who hold formal and informal power and to demand truth for the Afghan public.<sup>2</sup>

Later in the morning, our research group's planned meeting with the secretary-general of the High Peace Council, an institution established to support the Afghan government's negotiations with the Taliban and other insurgents, was canceled. A delegation from one such insurgent group, Gulbudin Hekmatyar's Hezb-i-Islami, had arrived for meetings with the secretary-general. Negotiations with Hekmatyar have been on and off over the years as part of an effort to bring a negotiated solution to the intense insurgency that, by the end of the post-9-11 decade, had swept across Afghanistan and which the Afghan government and ISAF had struggled to suppress during that same period. But as with the Taliban, the negotiations had failed to achieve much traction, despite the fact that many politicians and power brokers associated with Hezb-i-Islami have positions of official and unofficial power in Afghanistan. Unlike some of its key allies in Afghanistan, such as the United Kingdom, the United States had long been reluctant to embrace negotiations with the Taliban, believing that it first had to significantly weaken the insurgents militarily before negotiations could produce any lasting positive results. Yet by the middle of 2012, military progress on the battlefield turned out to be far more elusive than Washington and ISAF had hoped. Negotiations did start in 2010, but as of fall 2012, they were stalled with little achieved.

Still, the morning was cheerful; and after a snack of roadside kebab, our group headed to the Ministry of Mines to meet with the deputy minister, Mir Ahmad Javid, an impressive young man determined to steer the ministry toward good governance and sustainable development. Under the leadership of Minister Wahidullah Shahrani and Mir Ahmad Javid, the Ministry of Mines was working hard to transform itself from a notoriously corrupt government institution—the pervasive characteristic of governance in post-2002 Afghanistan—to one that could support the emergence of a robust, legal economy in the country. One of the poorest, most underdeveloped countries in the world and ravaged by three decades of war, Afghanistan would benefit enormously from being able to extract the large mineral riches—worth as much as \$1 trillion—that lie beneath its soil.<sup>3</sup> And indeed, Western budgeting for economic assistance to Afghanistan after 2014 has been banking on Afghanistan's ability to generate substantial economic revenues from the mining sector, which, under optimistic scenarios, the government of Afghanistan estimates will grow from a meager \$100 million in 2009 to as much as \$1.5 billion in 2016 and \$2.3 billion in 2025.<sup>4</sup>

An effective, corruption-free investment of the potential financial profits, focused on community and human-capital development, could be the economic engine of the country, reducing its grinding poverty. But for that to happen, Afghanistan would have to develop its nonexistent infrastructure, establish the rule of law, tame the corruption that makes it the third most corrupt country in the world after Somalia and North Korea, and significantly reduce the insecurity and violence that have wracked the country and its people since the late 1970s.<sup>5</sup> Otherwise, the mineral riches, just like the influx of foreign aid and other money into Afghanistan, could stimulate violent conflict instead of equitable economic growth, mimicking the detrimental outcomes of such mineral riches in countries like the Congo, Sierra Leone, and Liberia.

That morning when we were at the ministry, its officials and Western advisers were drafting new mining laws, seeking to reinforce anticorruption provisions and incorporate a development component into tender rules, all while trying to balance these considerations with incentives for foreign companies to invest in their highly insecure country, such as establishing some guarantees that a company that conducts exploration would get to exploit what it found. A few weeks later, a group of other senior Afghan cabinet officials objected to the new legislation, arguing

that the proposed law yielded too much of the profits and influence to foreign companies, thus placing the legislation and five open tenders in limbo.<sup>6</sup> That decision caught off guard Western governments, who were eager for Afghanistan's mining to expand rapidly and thereby avert a massive economic crisis in the country after 2014.

As we were leaving the Ministry of Mines building, we were stopped by guards who informed us that militant attacks were under way in the area, Wazir Akbar Khan, the select, "Broadway" center of Kabul, where ISAF headquarters, foreign embassies, and Afghan government buildings are located and where security is the tightest. This launch of the Taliban and Haqqani network (an affiliate insurgency) yearly spring offensive would strand us at the ministry for the next eight hours. Although we were only about 400 meters away from ISAF headquarters, the streets were deemed too insecure to cross; and, anyway, both ISAF headquarters and much of Wazir Akbar Khan went into immediate lockdown. No foreigners and few Afghan civilians remained on the streets. In fact, no locals should have been moving around during a militant strike either; but after several years of periodic insurgent attacks, many Afghans are no longer all that fazed by such terrorist incidents. Thus, although rocket-propelled grenade explosions and shootings were occurring throughout the quarter—with the Afghan parliament and the Kabul Star Hotel under the most serious attack and various nearby embassies receiving fire—at least some Afghans continued digging ditches (which somewhat eerily resembled graves), selling their wares, and going about their lives, however fraught with peril, insecurity, poverty, and injustice.

Six hours later, despite the firefights still going on in the city, most of the ministry employees left to be with their families. But since NATO headquarters were still under lockdown, our international group had to stay in the ministry, confined to a room where we could watch Al Jazeera's television coverage of the attacks continuing around us in Kabul. Eventually, however, the ministry guards moved our group out of that room, significantly reducing our access to information (by then most of our smartphone batteries had run down) and increasing our frustration. Eight hours after the beginning of the attacks, even our charade game of Taliban impersonations or sharing of spy stories could no longer relieve our confinement-induced boredom.

After yet another hour, we were running out of not only entertainment and patience but also water. Dinner too began to seem like a really

good idea, with lunch a faint memory. Not being battle- and hardship-toughened ISAF or Afghan soldiers or guerrilla fighters, we attempted to persuade the ministry guards to allow our two Afghan drivers to leave the compound, go to a kebab place, and come back with food and water. That request, however, ended our stay at the Ministry of Mines since it brought us to the attention of the Afghan National Army (ANA) unit commander just outside of the ministry's gate. For the first time in nine hours, the ANA commander became aware of the fact that several VIP *farangis* (outsiders, an expression used for Westerners) were holed up in the ministry. That discovery extremely displeased the commander. He strongly berated the forlorn ministry guards, who had been as undisturbed by the attacks as the Afghan civilians on the streets, for not informing him of our presence. Then he ordered us out of the compound, not wanting responsibility for protecting six foreigners.

That set off a round of back-and-forth calls with ISAF headquarters. Our NATO handlers continued to be under lockdown and still considered the streets too risky for movement, especially with unexploded ordnance lying around. Perhaps the greatest security danger came from accidentally provoking friendly fire from Afghan National Security Forces (ANSF) patrolling the streets while major buildings continued to be under attack and rumors of more suicide bombers in the city persisted.

Clearly determined that no foreigners would be his headache, the ANA commander wanted us off his hands irrespective of NATO's instructions and insisted that we vacate the building immediately. Over the course of the previous several hours, I had repeatedly suggested that we move to Serena Hotel, one of the luxury hotels in Kabul frequented by foreigners and also only 400 meters from the Ministry of Mines—in the opposite direction of ISAF headquarters. Although the Serena had been a popular target for the Taliban in the past (in 2008 the Taliban attacked the hotel and killed six people and injured another six), ISAF security now had no choice but to agree to our being moved there. Promptly we jumped into our two cars and made a mad dash for the hotel a short distance away down the now dark and deserted streets, narrowly avoiding a crash with another vehicle that was also barreling along at high speed. Near the front gates of Serena Hotel, the Afghan National Police (ANP) officers became extremely agitated and pointed their machine guns at us—understandably, since our two cars had arrived right in the middle of a siege and could have been driven by suicide bombers. Rolling down the car windows, we

shouted that we were Westerners and the police should not shoot. After a few tense moments, all was resolved and we got safely into the hotel.

In a somewhat surreal scene, given that firefights were raging all around, we spent about half an hour negotiating with the Afghan receptionist over whether we could get NATO's discount rate for the Serena's pricey rooms. The young man, at least overtly oblivious to the mayhem outside, remained perfectly composed yet intransigent over the price. This behavior epitomized the Afghans' tough bargaining about the terms of the Westerners' presence in their country until and after 2014, such as during the protracted negotiations with the United States over the U.S.-Afghanistan long-term Strategic Partnership Agreement, even as their country continues to be deeply troubled by insecurity and dependent on the Western security and economic assistance.

After a rather opulent dinner—considering the circumstances of the firefight and Afghanistan's persisting poverty—we checked into our rooms. As luck would have it, I wound up alone in a junior suite in a distant wing of the hotel, far from the rest of my colleagues. While a more luxurious accommodation, it also happened to be on the side of the hotel closest to major explosions, machine-gun fire, armored truck movements, and chopper flyways—all just outside my windows. Renewed military action against the Haqqani attackers by ANSF kicked off just after midnight and lasted until about 6:30 a.m., guaranteeing I would not get one minute of sleep.

Moreover, in the first hour of that firefight, the gunfire was so close that I wondered if the Serena itself was under attack. Given the attractiveness of the hotel as a target for the Taliban and the Haqqanis, I decided to lie in bed fully dressed, just in case a quick getaway was needed, and watched Al Jazeera's coverage of the war in Sudan and the environmental problems in Australia, punctuated by the sounds of the battle taking place outside my windows. At eight in the morning, bleary eyed, I met up with my colleagues for breakfast. All of them were outrageously well rested, having slept through the night and not having heard one single gunshot.

The April 15 attacks were spectacular in their level of coordination and the sheer number of terrorist actions that the Taliban and the Haqqanis were able to carry out simultaneously in Kabul and across Afghanistan. The attacks also clearly exposed a serious intelligence failure. In what had become his standard political ploy, Afghanistan's President Hamid Karzai (earlier in the decade a close interlocutor of President George

W. Bush but now an embattled leader deeply alienated from and suspicious of Washington) blamed the intelligence failure on ISAF. But given that Afghanistan was well into the so-called transition—the NATO-Afghanistan agreed process to transfer control of the country's security, economic development, and governance to the Afghans, after a decade of Western presence—responsibility for the failure to prevent the attacks lay just as much with the Afghan intelligence and security services. (The term transition is at times used differently by various stakeholders in Afghanistan policy. NATO frequently uses the term in a restricted sense as a military phase to be followed by redeployment. The U.S. government often uses the term more broadly as one pillar of a larger political engagement with Afghanistan. And President Karzai sometimes uses the expression to denote the period through 2014, after which he talks about “transformation.” My use of the term refers more broadly to the entire process—before and after 2014—of handing responsibility for security, political, and economic affairs over to the Afghan government, as well as any changes in the security, political, and economic order in Afghanistan resulting from that process.)

During the several weeks following the April 15 attacks, the ANSF managed to prevent at least two other large-scale attacks on Kabul but were unable to prevent a dramatic attack on the nearby Spozhmai resort hotel at Lake Qargha, which Kabulis use for a little bit of recreation.<sup>7</sup> The ANSF were also unable to prevent an attack by a female suicide bomber near the Kabul airport in September 2012 in response to a video mocking the Prophet Mohammad made by several individuals in the United States. Although such attacks do not alter the balance of power on the battlefield, they do significantly affect Afghans' perceptions of security—which of course is the intent of the insurgents. And indeed, although the April 15 attacks took the lives of less than a dozen Afghan security forces and only six Afghan civilians (the attackers let over ten civilians walk away unharmed), they did have a significant, if complicated, psychological impact. They demonstrated that even the most secure parts of Kabul can be breached. At the same time, the reaction of the ANSF for once inspired Afghans.<sup>8</sup> In particular, the special commando forces of the Afghan National Police who responded to the April 15 attacks performed well, demonstrating a real growth in capacity in the ANSF, our own group's experience with the Afghan National Army commander notwithstanding. The Afghan National Police forces managed to maintain better personal



security than they did during a previous terrorist attack in Kabul on the Intercontinental Hotel when they charged headlong into fire and certain death. This time, throughout the day and night of the attacks, they were able to maintain command and control. Two months later, however, the Afghan National Security Forces' performance at the Spozhmai resort hotel attack was more mixed. The Afghan forces managed to evacuate over 250 hotel customers—no small feat—but ultimately needed to lean on their Western counterparts to end the Taliban siege.<sup>9</sup>

After a decade of fighting—starting with the relatively easy victory over the Taliban in 2001 and then featuring increasingly tough fighting against a reemergent Taliban insurgency—the growth of the Afghan security forces has become the lynchpin of the U.S. and NATO strategy to achieve success in Afghanistan and extricate themselves from the war there. As yet, however, the Taliban and its jihadi cohorts—the Haqqanis and Hezb-i-Islami—remain entrenched and robust. Although their influence has been weakened by the 2010 “surge” of U.S. military forces, they still exercise substantial sway over large parts of Afghanistan. The Afghan security forces are clearly making progress, but they still continue to be dependent on NATO's assistance for critical assets and capacities; and dangerous ethnic rifts and competing patronage networks continue to run through the Afghan National Security Forces.

In response to so-called insider attacks by ANSF members against ISAF soldiers, ISAF announced in late September 2012 that it would curtail the partnering of ISAF units with ANSF units below the battalion level, unless a special permission for a specific operation were obtained from a two-star regional command ISAF general in Afghanistan.<sup>10</sup> ISAF maintained that this policy did not fundamentally alter its strategy or the effectiveness of its military and training campaigns and that it was only temporary in response to the feared Afghan reactions to the U.S.-made video mocking Prophet Mohammad.<sup>11</sup> However, if these new rules of engagement and force protection requirements remained in place, if they were not temporary or substantially revised, they would, in fact, have widespread—and largely negative—implications for the counterinsurgency effort and for training the ANSF, since the vast majority of all counterinsurgency operations, from village patrols to military encounters with the Taliban, take place at below the battalion level.

Even before these ISAF strategy changes were announced and despite previous real improvements in the Afghan security forces, few Afghans

believe that a better future is on the horizon after 2014. NATO and U.S. officials remain cautiously optimistic about the success of the counter-insurgency and stabilization campaign, even if acknowledging that progress is hard.<sup>12</sup> Thus Ambassador Ryan Crocker, who headed the U.S. Embassy in Afghanistan between July 2011 and July 2012, stated at the time of his departure that he considered the outbreak of another civil war in Afghanistan after 2014 unlikely.<sup>13</sup> But many Afghans fear there will be a renewed outbreak of civil war after 2014, when the NATO presence will be much reduced. This prospect of civil war and ethnic infighting after 2014 was foremost on the minds of most Afghans with whom I spoke on my last trip before writing this book—in April 2012.<sup>14</sup> As on my previous trips to Afghanistan over the past decade, these individuals included former and current Afghan government officials, both in Kabul and in various districts and provinces; journalists; civil society members and businessmen; officers of the ANA, ANP, and Afghan Local Police; Taliban and Hezb-i-Islami members; and ordinary Afghans, such as street vendors or truck drivers.<sup>15</sup> The success of the Afghan National Security Forces' response to the April attacks notwithstanding, most of my Afghan interlocutors were profoundly doubtful that the ANSF would be able to fill the security void created by the drawdown of ISAF forces and their far smaller and circumscribed presence after 2014.<sup>16</sup> To a degree, such a perception is driven by the Afghans' short time horizons. Experience has taught them not to trust promises; and the unstable security and economic environment they have faced over the past four decades leads them to make decisions based on immediate realities and to discount plans offered by Westerners. Continual robust performance and improvements of the ANSF, should they in fact materialize, will likely improve how Afghans perceive their forces. But as of the middle of 2012, few Afghans believed the ANSF capable of standing on their own after 2014 and preventing a significant deterioration in security and escalation of violence.

Worse yet, Afghans have become disconnected and alienated from the national government and the country's other power arrangements. They are profoundly dissatisfied with Kabul's inability and unwillingness to provide basic public services and with the widespread corruption of the power elites. They intensely resent the abuse of power, impunity, and lack of justice that have become entrenched over the past decade. The initial post-Taliban period of hope and promise did not last, as

governance in Afghanistan became rapidly defined by weakly functioning state institutions unable and unwilling to uniformly enforce laws and policies. Characteristically, official and unofficial power brokers issue exceptions from law enforcement to their networks of clients, who are thus able to reap high economic benefits and even get away with major crimes. Murder, extortion, and land grabbing, often perpetrated by those in the government, have gone unpunished. At the same time, access to jobs, promotions, and economic rents has depended on being on good terms with the local strongman rather than on merit and hard work. The political patronage networks too have become more exclusionary. Local government officials have had only a limited capacity and motivation to redress the broader governance deficiencies.

The level of infighting among elites, much of it along ethnic and regional lines, is at a peak. The result is pervasive hedging on the part of key power brokers, including through the resurrection of semiclandestine or officially sanctioned militias. The hedging is equally pervasive on the part of ordinary Afghans, many of whom are looking for a way out of Afghanistan. Meanwhile, especially in the Pashtun areas that constitute the Taliban heartland, families will often send one son to join the ANA and another to join the Taliban—and possibly a third son to join the local strongman's militia—in an attempt to maximize the chances of being on the side of whoever wins control of the area where they live after 2014.

In short, most Afghans with whom I have talked are deeply skeptical and outright afraid of the post-2104 future. “After NATO forces are reduced, people will be so insecure that they will not even dare to leave their shoes outside of their door,” a Pashtun tribal elder in the northern province of Baghlan told me.<sup>17</sup> There are many convincing reasons to doubt the stability of Afghanistan after 2014 and the success of the decade's efforts. After so much sacrificed blood and treasure, why should the continuing fragility of any painstaking achievements and the ominous destabilization of Afghanistan still matter to the United States and the international community?

The principal objective of U.S. policy in Afghanistan since the 9-11 attacks has been—and continues to be—to ensure that the country does not again become a haven for virulent *salafi* (ultraconservative Muslim) terrorist groups like al Qaeda. The premise underlying this policy is that if any part of Afghan territory once again comes under the control of salafi groups, or a Taliban sympathetic to such groups, it will provide

them a safe haven for training and planning, increase the lethality and frequency of their terrorist attacks—including attacks against the United States—and enable them to more easily escape retaliation by the West.

There is a debate among scholars as to how closely the Taliban and al Qaeda are aligned today and how definitively the Taliban has learned that its association with al Qaeda generates the wrath of the United States and is extremely costly for the group.<sup>18</sup> Clearly, the two groups are not identical and do not have identical objectives. As detailed in chapter 11, many Taliban commanders seem to have soured on al Qaeda.<sup>19</sup> However, fully breaking with al Qaeda may nonetheless generate costs for the Taliban with other jihadi groups and with at least some of its members, and the movement needs to balance those costs against the costs of U.S. and international military pressure on the Taliban in retaliation for any persisting international terrorist links.

Though the Arab Spring may have severely eroded al Qaeda's influence and possibly demoralized some of its members, and though it is now largely displaced from Afghanistan to Pakistan, it has lost none of its zeal to strike Western countries and undermine governments in Asia, the Middle East, and Africa.<sup>20</sup> The group continues to look for opportunities to exploit and territories to colonize, even if only vicariously through proxies, as in Western and Eastern Africa, and even if some of its local alliances are only fleeting and unreliable.<sup>21</sup>

Suppose Afghanistan once again becomes inflamed by violence, or that the writ of Kabul weakens further and the country becomes even more atomized, with various insurgent and power broker networks controlling different parts of the country. In such an environment, anti-Western terrorist groups may once again establish a dangerous foothold in Afghanistan—whether with the support of the Taliban or without. On a small scale, an anti-Pakistan jihadi group led by the commander Fazlullah has already been able to do so in the rugged and highly contested terrain of eastern Afghanistan. There can be little confidence that in a violent, chaotic, and highly contested post-2014 Afghanistan, the Taliban would pick a fight with other jihadi groups, such as al Qaeda.

Irrespective of any support from the Taliban, al Qaeda remains a major concern and prime target. But there has been disagreement all along about the broader implications of this U.S. counterterrorism interest for U.S. strategy in and toward Afghanistan and its neighbors, especially Pakistan.

Four years into the Obama administration, the debate appears to have been won by those who argue that what happens on the ground in Afghanistan matters only to a limited degree for the successful prosecution of the anti-al Qaeda campaign, and that the needed counterterrorism operations against al Qaeda and its allies can be effectively conducted from the air, reducing the need for a foreign presence in Afghanistan itself.

But is this minimalist strategy sound? In fact, there are limits to what counterterrorism from afar and from the air can accomplish. To be sure, Predator drone attacks can be effective in eliminating terrorist leaders and disrupting operations. But human intelligence and cooperation from local actors on the ground are often critical for the success of counterterrorism operations, including intelligence input for the drones. Moreover, few Afghans, including the power brokers in charge of militias that have been cooperating with the United States, will have an interest in persisting in the effort if they believe that they will be abandoned to the mercy of the Taliban.

A strategy that in effect dismisses stability and state-building as objectives for Afghanistan also ignores the serious and very likely risk that an unstable Afghanistan will further destabilize Pakistan and, consequently, the entire Central and South Asian region. Pakistan's tribal areas as well as Baluchistan have been host to many of the salafi groups, and the Afghan Taliban uses these areas as safe havens. Thus Pakistan's cooperation in tackling these safe havens has been important for U.S. and ISAF operations in Afghanistan (even if such help is often not forthcoming, as explained in chapter 10). But if Afghanistan is unstable and harbors salafi groups that infiltrate into Pakistan, then Pakistan itself could become deeply destabilized and distracted from tackling its other crises, including militancy in the Punjab and a host of domestic calamities, such as intense political instability, economic atrophy, widespread poverty, and a severe energy crisis.

Still fearing encirclement by India, the more Pakistan feels threatened by a hostile government or instability in Afghanistan, the less likely it will be capable of dealing with its massive domestic challenges. The Pakistani state is already hollowed out, its administrative structures undergoing a steady decline since independence. Major macroeconomic deficiencies have increased, and deep poverty and marginalization persist amid a semifeudal distribution of power, often ineffective and corrupt political leadership, internal social and ethnic fragmentation, and compromised security forces.<sup>22</sup> The internal security challenge is far more insidious

than that recently encountered by the Pakistani military in the tribal and Khyber-Pakhtunkhwa areas. In actuality, it is the Punjabi groups, such as the Punjabi Taliban, Lashkar-i-Taiba, and Sipah-i-Sahaba, who pose a deeper threat to Pakistan.

Extreme internal fragmentation in Pakistan and a loss of central control, particularly if it extended to the military, could set off one of the most dangerous security threats in Asia and in the world. After all, Pakistan is a large, nuclear-armed Muslim country that coexists in only a precarious peace with its neighbor India.

A disintegration of the Afghan state after 2014 or an outbreak of intense fighting will be a great boost to salafi groups in Pakistan and throughout the world: once again, a great power will be seen as having been defeated by the salafists in Afghanistan. From a strategic communications standpoint, few areas are as important as Afghanistan. The perception that the United States has been beaten there does not require that the Taliban take over the country. From the salafi perspective, merely a gradual but steady crumbling of the Kabul government, with a progressively greater accretion of territory and power by the Taliban, would be sufficient to claim victory. An outbreak of civil war after 2014 would feed the same perception, even if the Taliban did not rapidly take over Kabul and still could not control the majority of Afghanistan's territory.

Finally, switching to a minimalist strategy that is indifferent to stability inside Afghanistan has implications for America's reputation—and self-image—as a country that can be relied upon to honor its commitments. In mobilizing support for Operation Enduring Freedom, the United States made a pledge to the Afghan people to help them improve their difficult condition and not abandon them once again. Although often caricatured as anti-Western, antigovernment, antimodern, and stuck in medieval times, Afghans crave what others do: relief from violence and insecurity; sufficient economic progress to escape dire, grinding poverty; access to justice; and a significant say in how they are governed. Concern by the United States for the well-being of the people of Afghanistan would not in itself justify continuing what has turned out to be an immensely costly effort. But since the United States did intervene—albeit for other reasons—it has an obligation to help deal with the elemental needs of the people whose lives its actions have so profoundly altered. As Secretary of State Colin Powell argued in the summer of 2002, when warning President George W. Bush about the consequences of invading Iraq, with

intervention comes responsibility for the lives of the local population. “You are going to be the proud owner of 25 million people,” he said with purposeful irony. “You will own all their hopes, aspirations, and problems. You’ll own it all.”<sup>23</sup>

This range of considerations—not just the threats and worries but also the aspirations of the Afghan people—should have animated and guided U.S. policy. But an analysis of the evolution of Washington’s strategies in Afghanistan and of their ambiguous and unsteady character reveals an insufficient appreciation of the stakes and interests as well as of the desires of the Afghan people.

How is it that this enterprise—which started out with a rapid toppling of the Taliban regime and a delighted embrace by the Afghans of their liberation from its brutal rule—now, more than a decade later, hangs by a thread, and many Afghans believe that a civil war is on the horizon?

Many will answer that the United States and the international community tried to do too much in Afghanistan: they got bogged down in a “nation-building” mission that attempted to bring “Valhalla” to a people who wanted to be left untouched by the outside world.<sup>24</sup> The foreigners expended resources on a state-building task alien to the locals, who did not want a central government and were satisfied with their tribal ways—a mission that therefore was bound to fail.<sup>25</sup> The United States and its allies should have concentrated on simply destroying the Taliban regime and al Qaeda’s capabilities and safe haven in Afghanistan.<sup>26</sup>

This book argues the opposite: the United States and the international community never strongly and consistently demanded that the Afghan government give the people what they crave most in addition to security—namely, justice, the rule of law, and an accountable government. Instead, the post-Taliban state has frequently failed to deliver the elemental public goods and services the people desire, and has also been outright malign from the perspective of many of the country’s citizens. The emergent regime has been characterized by rapaciousness, corruption, tribal discrimination, and predatory behavior on the part of government officials and power brokers closely aligned with the state. Crime—including land theft; corrupt, nepotistic, and unfulfilled contracts; and embezzlement—has spread rapidly throughout the country.

Meanwhile, since being routed from Kabul in 2001, the Taliban has managed in many places to step into the lacuna of effective and accountable state power and good governance. It has offered itself as a protector

to marginalized communities and those unable to capture rents from the post-2001 windfalls, acting as a patron capable of redressing these deficiencies. Although brutal and repressive, the Taliban nonetheless appeals to those alienated from the Afghan government and provides its own brand of draconian—but predictable—order. At the same time, more often than not, the Taliban insurgents have simply imposed their rule on the population through the barrels of their Kalashnikovs. Although the causes of the group's emergence and reemergence are multiple and varied, the weakness of the state and the poor functioning of official governance have been crucial enablers of the movement's ability to gain traction with local populations.

The United States and the international community have not adequately focused on restraining pernicious power brokers and corruption, nor have they used their leverage to promote accountability. Rather, they systematically underemphasized good governance and subordinated it to short-term battlefield priorities, pushing it aside and postponing focus on it, unable to muster the resources and persistence needed to improve governance. Throughout the decade's effort, Washington thus remained ambivalent about whether to define the mission in Afghanistan in narrow counterterrorism terms or to genuinely embrace a state-building effort. Although the latter was occasionally emphasized, the difficulties of trying to improve governance in an increasingly corrupt system and the perceived needs of short-term military imperatives constantly eroded Washington's commitment to any broad state-building effort. At other times, the international community often defined good governance in ways that were contrary to the notions of good governance held by many Afghans. And as President Karzai lost legitimacy not just internationally but also domestically, he would try to shift the responsibility for bad governance in Afghanistan onto the international community, blaming it for corruption and a host of Afghanistan's other problems.

To be clear, whatever the many shortcomings of the U.S. and international efforts, the blame for bad governance in Afghanistan lies first and foremost on the shoulders of the Afghan government and the many problematic Afghan power brokers. However, this does not absolve the United States and its allies of their mistakes—which have been “sins” of omission as well as commission.

In short, the United States never really embraced the aspirations of the Afghan people. The Bush administration over-promised what it could



accomplish in Afghanistan, under-reached in its goals, and under-resourced its efforts, creating expectations both in Afghanistan and the United States it could not fulfill. The Obama administration, on the other hand, mostly defined its goals and expectations in Afghanistan in ways that were indifferent to Afghan aspirations. Thus, having started in 2001 as Operation Enduring Freedom to effect a presumably swift regime change to drive the al Qaeda–harboring Taliban from power, the U.S. military intervention in Afghanistan morphed by the mid-2000s into a full-blown counterinsurgency effort against the Taliban’s drive to retake control of the country. In 2009 the Obama administration inherited the U.S. and international mission there in a condition of deep crisis. The Bush administration’s economy-of-force, minimal-input approach for Afghanistan and its prioritization of Iraq had left a structural vacuum in Afghanistan that motivated national and local power brokers to return to their narrow pursuit of immediate power and profit maximization, at the expense of building effective and accountable governance. Although the Obama administration tried to reverse this negative syndrome, its imposition of a time limit on the deployment of U.S. forces only reinforced the short-term, what’s-in-it-for-me calculus of the Afghan power brokers. The result has been a continuing uphill struggle to devise mechanisms to improve governance and sustain security gains. Henceforth, and still prevailing at the time of this writing, the United States and its allies have been wrestling with a fundamental predicament: the Taliban insurgency feeds on the condition of inept and corrupt governance, yet the United States and its international partners have been unable and often unmotivated to induce better governance from the Karzai regime and unofficial power brokers.

The Obama administration came into office determined to make the war in Afghanistan and its spillover into Pakistan a key focus of its foreign policy. In comparison with the Bush administration, the Obama administration significantly increased the military, economic, and civilian resources available for the war; yet it has found itself facing some of the same dilemmas and challenges as its predecessor.

Insufficient security has prevented many of the civilians in ISAF and those working for coalition governments from interacting fully with the Afghans. Isolated at the bases, they have had to acquire information and intelligence from problematic interlocutors who often distort their reports to serve their own interests. Consequently, as detailed in chapters 5, 6, and 7, Washington has often been unable to identify those

responsible for discriminatory and abusive policies or to persuade Kabul to crack down on such behavior.

Throughout the preceding decade, including during the Obama administration, the United States and the international community struggled to resolve whether the mission in Afghanistan is one of narrowly defined counterterrorism or whether it also includes broader state-building, and hence needs considerably more resources. Oscillation between the two definitions of the U.S.-ISAF mission both raised and disappointed the expectations of the Afghan population (see chapters 2, 3, and 4). In this context, the Taliban was able to exploit the unredressed government deficiencies to gain traction with local populations (see chapter 3 and 4).

The limited willingness of the United States and its allies to devote the necessary resources for the larger state-building mission, including the military aspects of counterinsurgency, has led to various problematic shortcuts on the battlefield—crucially the reliance on manipulative power brokers and controversial paramilitary forces, such as the Afghan Local Police, both of whom undermine governance in Afghanistan, in the present and the long term (see chapters 5, 6, and 8). Just like in Woody Allen's *Bullets over Broadway* movie, it was the various Afghan power broker mafias who in many ways ended up writing the script of the Afghanistan stabilization effort. But unlike in Allen's movie, the outcome has not been uplifting, let alone funny. Mafia rule, especially if it does better than the state in providing security, regulatory services, and socio-economic benefits, can gain a great deal of legitimacy and political capital among the population.<sup>27</sup> But a fundamental problem with Afghanistan's post-Taliban political and economic arrangements has been that the mafias that have emerged have been highly abusive, capricious, and critically deficient in the provision of either security or economic benefits to the wider population. And since many of the mafia-like power brokers have been linked to the Afghan government and even frequently held official positions in the government, many Afghans have come to see the state itself as a thuggish mafia racket without benefits. At the same time, Washington has continually remained conflicted over whether and how to tackle corruption (see chapters 2, 5, and 6). Efforts to work through the national government in Kabul or through local officials often failed to redress the governance deficiencies.

Often, the international definition of good governance in Afghanistan—particularly suppression of poppy cultivation—has remained at

odds with the human security needs of the Afghan people. Although the Obama administration's counternarcotics strategy, at least in design, broke with previous counterproductive policies, its implementation often problematically mimicked the Bush strategy, as chapter 9 shows. Chapter 9 also reveals how, far from uniformly encouraging needed economic development, the large amounts of economic aid that flowed into Afghanistan without effective monitoring instead generated their own problems. Often designed as short-term programs to buy love rather than catalyze sustainable development, the aid flows themselves encouraged some of the predatory and rapacious behavior that underlies bad governance in Afghanistan.

The Obama administration also took office resolved to design a regional framework conducive to a stable and prosperous Afghanistan, one that would transform Washington's relationship with Pakistan from a transactional one to a strategic partnership. But Islamabad turned out to be as problematic an ally for the Obama administration as for the Bush administration, and by 2012 the U.S.-Pakistan relationship reached one of its historic lows. And although they are far less pernicious for the stabilization effort than Pakistan, most of Afghanistan's neighbors are still competing with one another and persist in interfering in Afghan affairs, as described in chapter 10.

As discussed in chapters 2 and 11, the military plan of the Obama administration originally assumed that by the time the United States and ISAF began scaling down their presence, they would hand over to the Afghans large parts of the country's territory secured. Four years later, some real progress had been achieved, such as in central Helmand and Kandahar—both of which used to be either intense battle zones or under the Taliban's sway. But as this book goes to press, the territory cleared that is being handed over to the Afghans is much smaller than had been projected. Furthermore, the United States and ISAF are not only handing the Afghans a stalemated war, they are attempting to increase the Afghan National Security Forces' capacity enough to beat back the Taliban insurgency while simultaneously restricting their own capacity to operate in Afghanistan. Meanwhile, as also detailed in chapter 11, negotiations with the Taliban have so far not gained any real traction.

Yet despite all of these negative developments and problematic trends, and despite the deep anxiety with which many Afghans look at the 2014 transition, a failure of the international effort to leave Afghanistan with

a stable government is not preordained. Afghanistan is a complex place, where local realities are often highly diverse. There are glimmers of hope. Security has improved in some parts of the country. Afghan security forces exhibit growing capabilities, even as they continue to be challenged by many deep problems. And a new generation of Afghans is rising, many of whom are motivated to take on the problematic power brokers, rise above ethnic cliques, and bring the rule of law to Afghanistan.

Yes, the United States and its international partners in Afghanistan are exhausted and focused on getting out of there. At the end of the four years since Bush turned the problem over to Obama, Washington's talk on Afghanistan has mostly been about irretrievably winding down the war.<sup>28</sup> However, the United States and the international community still can—and should—attempt to empower those Afghans who are determined to pursue the broader interests of the people over narrow power and profit maximization.

At the July 2012 Tokyo Conference on Afghanistan, the international community's insistence that the Afghan government start seriously combating corruption and improving governance as conditions for continued economic support induced President Karzai to once again publicly commit himself to tackling corruption. Whether he will actually enforce any of the provisions from the grab bag of policies he announced and whether the international community will have the wherewithal to hold him to his word remain highly uncertain. The reshuffling of key cabinet posts and governorship positions that Karzai undertook in late summer and fall 2012 seems to indicate that once again he was privileging personal loyalty and ethnic kinship over competence.<sup>29</sup> Such signs are not auspicious.

The faster the United States scales back its efforts in Afghanistan and the more rapidly ISAF forces reduce their presence before 2014, the more the leverage of the international community will be diminished as well. Any improvements in Afghan military and police capacities also will be jeopardized and increases in security undermined. But equally, without major improvements in governance, it is difficult to see how lasting stability after 2014 could be achieved, whatever the balance of remaining military forces on the ground. Without adequate governance in Afghanistan, the international stabilization effort will at most delay the crumbling of the current Afghan state and the outbreak of yet another phase of civil war.

As this analysis shows, the United States and the international community have yet to make various decisions that will have an impact on many trends in Afghanistan. Despite a reduction in leverage due to upcoming drawdowns, these decisions can encourage or discourage stability, and they will influence the country's—and the region's—security, political, and economic developments. In the concluding chapter, I provide a detailed set of recommendations based on the premise that the United States and its allies still have the capacity to significantly affect the situation in Afghanistan, for better or for worse. These recommendations include

- emphasizing U.S. and international engagement with Afghanistan from 2015 onward,

- maintaining an international military presence and robust training and advisory capacity until 2014 and beyond,

- reducing corruption and improving governance,

- reining in the warlords,

- reining in the Afghan Local Police and other militias,

- synchronizing counternarcotics efforts with good governance,

- prioritizing economic sustainability and capacity building, and

- using negotiations with the Taliban as another mechanism to improve governance.

Devoting whatever capacities and will that can still be gathered in the West to emphasize and encourage good governance does not guarantee success: many of the larger and deeper trends in Afghanistan may now be outside the control and beyond the leverage of the international community. But exiting fast, defining the mission from 2015 onward only in very narrow counterterrorism terms, and writing off good governance will only guarantee failure.