

## CHAPTER ONE

# Introduction

“Make no mistake: we do not want to keep our troops in Afghanistan. We seek no military bases there. It is agonizing for America to lose our young men and women. It is costly and politically difficult to continue this conflict. We would gladly bring every single one of our troops home if we could be confident that there were not violent extremists in Afghanistan and Pakistan determined to kill as many Americans as they possibly can.”

—President Barack Obama, June 4, 2009<sup>1</sup>

“Conditions on the ground are now much more difficult than in 2002 when the Afghan people overwhelmingly welcomed the international intervention. The goals set, however, are still achievable if the needs and aspirations of the Afghan people are the focus of renewed efforts.”

—Former Afghanistan finance minister Ashraf Ghani, April 2009<sup>2</sup>

**A**fghanistan has become America’s longest war. Eight years after the United States set out to destroy the al Qaeda terrorist network responsible for the September 11 attacks on New York and Washington, along with the Taliban regime that gave it sanctuary, American and NATO troops were still in Afghanistan fighting a resurgent Taliban in a war that had not achieved its original objectives and that threatened to have negative effects on the stability of neighboring Pakistan. Barack Obama promised during his presidential campaign that he would refocus on Afghanistan, that the previous administration had made a mistake by

turning away from it. But the Obama administration's decisions in March and then December 2009 to increase America's commitment to the country have raised questions about how many American lives and how much of its wealth should be spent on the effort.

Secretary of Defense Robert M. Gates, in a CBS interview in early 2009, lamented that the mission in Afghanistan, like any war, is extremely painful for those actually carrying it out. Since 2008 Afghanistan has, on average, been a more dangerous place for American soldiers to deploy than Iraq. Costs are high not only for the families of those who have died in battle, but also for those physically wounded, those afflicted with psychological trauma, and those who have been deployed time and time again in recent years.

For many years the Afghanistan war was fought with minimal effort. U.S. troop commitments were typically one-tenth as large as those for Iraq during President George W. Bush's first term; NATO allies contributed too, but their troop numbers were even more modest than America's during most of the effort. NATO sought to build an Afghan security force less than one-fifth the size of Iraq's, even though Afghanistan is larger and slightly more populous than Iraq. And it did not provide the necessary trainers to help that smaller force; in early 2009, for example, only one-fourth of all police units had embedded mentors from international partners like the United States.<sup>3</sup>

This situation has changed. Combined foreign forces, organized under a NATO-led mission, numbered more than 100,000 at the end of 2009 and headed to 140,000 in 2010. With annual U.S. costs reaching about \$100 billion, it is hardly cheap in financial terms either.

The war is also Afghanistan's longest. It is essentially a conflict that goes back thirty years, to the Soviet invasion. Modern Afghanistan is about as old as the United States, and over the last two and a half centuries, it has never seen such a protracted period of conflict. Britain and Russia played out their "great game" of geostrategic competition at Afghanistan's expense throughout much of the nineteenth century, but this was not a period of continued fighting as the last thirty years have been.

Is the war in Afghanistan now a quagmire? Can the United States and its allies still "win?" Can Afghans really come together as a country to unify their land and build a modern state? Are the stakes really worth it for the United States as well as for other Western powers fighting in this part of the world? Finally, how will we know if the strategy is succeeding as intended?

These are questions increasingly being asked by the American people and Congress. The skeptics include many members of President Obama's own Democratic party, such as Representative David Obey, who has warned Mr. Obama that his Afghanistan-Pakistan strategy has the potential to "devour" his presidency. Vice President Joe Biden is also reported to be wary of a counterinsurgency strategy requiring large numbers of American forces.<sup>4</sup> These are also the questions addressed by this short book. It is designed to help readers understand more about Afghanistan and the war there. It is meant to help inform the American and broader international debate on Afghanistan in 2010 and 2011—absolutely crucial years. As the 2010 fighting season unfolds, we expect another tough and bloody period of combat. The Afghanistan "surge" is not producing results as fast as the Iraq surge did in 2007, and citizens around the world have a right to know why. They also deserve to know how much longer they must be patient, how much longer they must tolerate the high costs in lives and treasure, before a turnaround can reasonably be expected.

At this point, in early 2010, we strongly support the war effort. That is perhaps no surprise. One of us is an Afghan American living in Kabul and trying to help rebuild her country. The other is a defense scholar who became a major supporter of the surge in Iraq and believes strongly in military strategies for counterinsurgency that emphasize protection of the indigenous population and development of local institutions. (He is also a former Peace Corps volunteer in Congo who has seen the consequences of international disinterest and disengagement in a conflict-prone country.) The new Obama strategy for Afghanistan has these basic emphases as well. But as analysts, we know that no war effort should be sustained indefinitely if it fails to achieve progress. In addition to making the case for the current Afghan-NATO strategy, therefore, we also try to project how long it should be before a major improvement in conditions is plainly visible. And we have numerous suggestions, on the military and civilian sides, for how the strategy can be improved.

Perhaps the idea of winning is wrong-headed; winning implies a definitive end, whereas extremism in Afghanistan has been around for decades and may not be within our power to eliminate. But we do think that by 2011, this war can turn around and that by 2013 or so—when the U.S. and NATO role in the war will reach the twelve-year mark—there will be a chance to turn over the main effort to Afghans themselves. True success may take some additional time; building a strong Afghan

state and strong economy after so many years of conflict will likely take a generation. But making Afghanistan strong enough to continue the war-fighting and state-building effort itself, while depriving al Qaeda and the Taliban of sanctuaries within Afghanistan from which to attack other countries, is quite likely achievable within a few years. Now that the effort is to be properly resourced with the additional troops that the war's commander, General Stanley A. McChrystal, has requested and the additional civilian support and aid money Ambassador Karl Eikenberry has asked for, we believe that if the Afghan government can make at least some strides toward greater reform and greater effectiveness on the ground for its people, the odds of at least partial success are good—certainly better than 50 percent.

## THE STAKES

Just how important is this war, anyway? This is a fair question as the nation doubles down its bets and commits more of its sons and daughters than ever before to a faraway conflict in a remote part of the world.

The simplest answer to this question is to prevent another 9/11 that might originate on Afghan soil, as the original September 11, 2001, attack did. All nineteen hijackers trained there, as have many other anti-Western terrorists over the years. The leadership of al Qaeda and associated movements has now pledged loyalty to Mullah Omar, head of the Afghanistan Taliban, and al Qaeda has trained the Taliban in various methods of attack. Intelligence reports also suggest growing ties between al Qaeda and another major insurgent militia with an extremist ideology, the so-called Haqqani network operating in Afghanistan's east (especially in Khost, Paktia, and Paktika provinces).<sup>5</sup> So the triumph of insurgent groups in Afghanistan would likely lead to a renewed home and sanctuary for al Qaeda within Afghanistan, with a friendly government protecting it—greatly facilitating its training, coordination, and command-and-control efforts globally. Such a sanctuary would be very troubling. Some say it would matter little, given al Qaeda's various other options for organizing its followers. However, the degree of brainwashing required of people being trained to be suicide bombers in the pursuit of a perverted version of jihad is extreme. The notion that it can happen on a large scale just anywhere or through the Internet is improbable; that is not the way extremist movements tend to develop devout followers.<sup>6</sup>

As Gordon Smith, a Canadian official and scholar, plainly put it, in words that would apply equally well to most Western countries including the United States: “It is in Canada’s interest that Afghanistan and the bordering regions of Pakistan not again be used as a base from which global terrorist attacks can be launched: think of London, Madrid, Bali and Mumbai, as well as 9/11.”<sup>7</sup> As bad as the first few incidents on Smith’s list were themselves, 9/11 was far worse—and 9/11 was the plot that benefited in large measure from al Qaeda’s ability to organize on Afghan soil.

The stakes, however, go beyond simply denying al Qaeda another sanctuary. Afghanistan has special importance in the minds of al Qaeda—and would-be recruits of al Qaeda—as a symbol of a successful attack against the West. Were we to lose there, al Qaeda would argue that its predictions about the West’s weakness and lack of staying power were correct. It would claim momentum in its broader, global struggle against “infidels.” That could help the terrorists find new followers who wanted to be on the winning side of history. It would also restore momentum to al Qaeda, momentum that it has lost across the globe from Iraq to Saudi Arabia to Indonesia and elsewhere. The head of the British armed forces, General Sir David Richards, stated that a NATO “failure [in Afghanistan] would have a catalytic effect on militant Islam around the world and in the region because the message would be that al-Qaeda and the Taliban have defeated the US and the British and NATO, the most powerful alliance in the world. So why wouldn’t that have an intoxicating effect on militants everywhere? The geo-strategic implications would be immense.”<sup>8</sup>

Some say that the Taliban and other Afghan resistance movements are not our real enemies and that we should reach an accommodation with them. But many with firsthand experience of the Taliban in recent years would beg to differ. David Rohde of the *New York Times*, who was held captive in late 2008 and much of 2009 by the group, vividly described the extreme degrees of hatred for the United States, and support for al Qaeda’s global agenda, among its members. As counterterrorism expert Bruce Riedel says, “Terrorists don’t stay in their lanes.” They tend to work together. That includes other groups in Afghanistan besides the Taliban, such as the Haqqani network.<sup>9</sup> The goal of a large, growing fundamentalist movement that would attempt to create a caliphate throughout much of the Islamic world, and use extreme methods against

American allies and interests as well as other dissenting groups and individuals in the process, is not confined to al Qaeda. A victory for the Afghan resistance is effectively a victory, and a major one at that, for al Qaeda and associated movements with a global and anti-Western agenda.

Another crucial reason to prevail in Afghanistan is to prevent Pakistani extremists from using Afghanistan as a sanctuary and training ground for launching attacks against their own country. A destabilized, nuclear-armed Pakistan, with up to 100 nuclear weapons and thousands of extremist fighters including al Qaeda partisans, would be an even greater threat to the United States and other states than would a failed state in Afghanistan itself. Afghanistan is not very far from central Pakistan, and the border regions between the two countries are so hard to police that it would be highly undesirable to allow extremists such a safe haven so close to a strategically crucial state. At precisely the moment when Pakistan is finally committing more of its resources to going after extremists in its own tribal regions, it would be an unfortunate moment to give them a sanctuary within Afghanistan. Moreover, there are growing reasons to fear that Afghan Taliban, Pakistani Taliban, and al Qaeda have developed more links and more forms of cooperation in recent years. This is not a conclusive argument in favor of winning in Afghanistan at all costs, but it is an important reason why defeat would be worrisome.

Some argue that our core goals can be achieved through a more narrow counterterrorism agenda, rather than a full-scale counterinsurgency approach. That is, they favor “CT, not COIN,” to use the acronyms commonly employed for each concept. They believe that another 9/11 could be prevented, and major disruption to Pakistan averted, by a more limited approach. Under this strategy, special forces would periodically attack any cells that coalesced within Afghanistan, even in the absence of a stable central government. Drones, cruise missiles, and other forms of standoff attack would contribute as well, carrying out strikes in both Afghanistan and Pakistan. In this way, these critics say, we would accomplish our core objectives without engaging in huge risks to American personnel or unrealistic aspirations about the possibility of helping construct a functioning Afghan state.

But it is the CT plan that is unrealistic. In essence, it is the plan that the Bush administration tried in its early years and that clearly failed, leaving us with the dilemma we have today. To be effective CT must have intelligence, but obtaining solid intelligence on the locations of

terrorists is very difficult without a strong presence on the ground and the cooperation of friendly local actors. Such friendly local Afghans are much harder to find, and protect, in a chaotic, destabilized country.<sup>10</sup> At some point, if and when the Afghan resistance prevails in combat, as would likely happen under a CT approach, the air bases and other facilities we currently use to attack extremists in both Afghanistan and Pakistan could also be lost.

Proponents of CT respond that the international community is trying a more minimal approach to countering al Qaeda in places such as Somalia and some of the tribal areas of Yemen—two additional places largely unpoliced by any effective government. If we can get by with such an approach in these places, why not Afghanistan too, one might ask? But Afghanistan is a more remote country than Somalia or Yemen, and a place with more tribal networks and political actors favorable to al Qaeda. As the Bush administration learned, air strikes and commando raids against suspected terror targets are much harder to pull off quickly and effectively in Afghanistan than they would be in other places. Afghanistan is therefore a safer, more convenient place for al Qaeda to operate. And al Qaeda has already proven its interest in operating from Afghanistan. Its leadership remains based nearby in the mountains of western Pakistan even today. There is currently considerable Pakistani action against extremists in these regions, so we finally have a chance to execute a hammer and anvil approach against the major redoubts for al Qaeda and associated movements. To be sure, a CT approach may be our only fallback position if the counterinsurgency effort fails. But it is a poor substitute.

Yet another reason to try to succeed in Afghanistan is to make good on our commitment to an important Muslim people. We owe the Afghans, who have suffered greatly as a pawn in great-power conflict over the last thirty years, a chance at a better future. Their decade-long stand against the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan weakened the Soviet Union and helped us end the cold war. We have a historical debt, therefore, as well as a moral one. It is also worth noting that the Afghans' drug production problem would not exist at today's current scale without a market for illegal narcotics in the Western world, a fact that further implicates us in Afghanistan's fate and deepens our moral responsibility. For one of us, this is an especially personal argument, but the point has importance regardless, given America's values and its role in the world as a beacon of democracy and human rights. Americans cannot build a

new Afghanistan themselves, of course; only Afghans can do that. But the United States, as well as the broader international community, has a certain moral obligation to give them a chance to do so. This is not an argument for staying forever, but it is an argument for trying to do the job right before going home. In addition to its moral attributes, such a strategy can help counter (at least somewhat) those cynics who falsely claim that the United States does not care about the well-being of Muslim peoples and only uses them for its own Machiavellian purposes. Such arguments, reinforced by the stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, hurt the United States because they help al Qaeda and related groups recruit followers.<sup>11</sup>

There is admittedly a flip side to this argument, however: if the Afghan people and, more to the point, the Afghan government fail to do their part in this war, the American moral commitment at some point will no longer be so binding. To put it differently, the United States and other countries could try their utmost and still fail because of mistakes made by President Hamid Karzai and other Afghan officials—and at that point, there would be little point in further investments in failure. Other means of stabilizing Pakistan, the most crucial country in the region for American strategic interests, would have to be explored. It is important that President Karzai understand this, rather than view the international commitment to his country as open-ended, because his administration has a crucial role to play in improving our strategy in Afghanistan. But it would clearly be much better to succeed in Afghanistan, thereby depriving al Qaeda of a new sanctuary and a major propaganda victory and preventing Pakistani Taliban from gaining another redoubt of their own.

## WHY WE CAN SUCCEED

The Afghan people, working with the international community, have a very good chance to succeed in this war. Success means defeating or at least containing the insurgency, gradually improving law and order, and creating infrastructure to allow for economic progress. The road will not be easy, and the outcome will not be a prosperous Western-style democracy. Secretary Gates was surely right when he said that there will be no “Valhalla” in Central Asia. But we can help the Afghans build a viable state that over time can increasingly control its territory and improve the lives of its people.



This may seem a modest set of goals. But if we can attain them, it would prevent Afghanistan from becoming a place where 9/11-type attacks are again planned and organized. It also would literally keep alive future generations of Afghan peoples—in contrast to the last thirty years. Since the Soviets invaded in 1979, well over 1 million have died from violence, while nearly all the rest have lived in extreme poverty and deprivation.

Here are some reasons to hope for success. First, Afghans want a better future for themselves. This is true for Afghans who remain in their own country, as well as for the diaspora of Afghans around the world—many of whom have moved back home to help build a new country, others of whom stand ready to invest and trade and assist in other ways. Most Afghans reject war. They also reject the Taliban, by 90 percent or more in most polls. Among the majority of the Afghan people who are not Pashtun, in fact, support for the Taliban is virtually zero.<sup>12</sup> Even among the Durrani, one of the two main Pashtun tribal groupings, support for the Taliban has been limited (the Taliban's main support has come from the Pashtun Ghilzai tribes).<sup>13</sup> In Kandahar City, the base for Taliban operations before they were ousted in 2001 and a central focus of the current insurgency, Taliban support reached an all-time high of 25 percent in 2009—but even there, three of every four Afghans had a favorable opinion of the government.<sup>14</sup> The Ulema Council of Afghanistan and other important religious groups also have supported the Afghan government and criticized the Taliban.<sup>15</sup>

In fact, the Taliban is not a popular insurgency. It is in equal parts a narcoterrorist organization willing to use drug smuggling to finance its operations, an extremist Islamist movement with an intolerant view of nonbelievers and a backward view of the role of women in society, and a ruthless organization willing to use brutal violence against innocent, law-abiding citizens to impose its version of Islam.

There is no clear consensus for Afghans on where to go from here. They are angry with the international community, and to a lesser extent with President Karzai, for doing a poor job in helping them build a viable state over the last eight years. And among some Afghans, that anger sometimes translates into support for insurgents—at least locally and temporarily. But it does not mean the Afghan people want a return to the communist rule of the late 1970s and 1980s, or the anarchy and bloodletting of the late 1980s and early 1990s, or the tyranny of the Taliban thereafter.

Despite being devastated by thirty years of war, Afghans are resolute, resourceful, and proud people. They have a real sense of national history and identity, even if some aspects of their nationalism have been weakened by decades of conflict and need to be rebuilt. They are a young, forward-looking people—70 percent of the population is under thirty and nearly one-third of all citizens now live in cities. They are indeed good fighters, but they are not the caricature of backward, xenophobic warriors so often portrayed in the mass media.<sup>16</sup> They are aware of the opportunity promised by a modern, democratic government supported by a strong economy and an educated population. There are many good people in positions of power in government, as well as in the private sector and civil society. The promising performance of the Afghan National Army also suggests that it is in fact possible to build viable, national institutions—that the country is more than a collection of tribes with no regard for central authority and no sense of Afghan identity.

There are also many good and committed “average citizens.” In Kandahar City citizens are telling authorities about the locations of up to 80 percent of all improvised explosive devices before they go off, allowing security forces to defuse them. This high percentage, higher than ever witnessed in Iraq, further suggests that our efforts to quell the Taliban may have found unexpected support from the general population in one of the Taliban strongholds, support that a counterinsurgency can build upon. Progress is apparent in other places too. In the town of Nawa in Helmand Province, for example, an infusion of U.S. forces in 2009 has turned a previously lawless area held by the Taliban into a relatively secure area where ordinary people can begin to get back to their daily lives.<sup>17</sup>

Second, elements of the Afghan security forces are improving fast. This is most true for the army, and for some police units that have received intensive oversight and mentoring through programs like the Focused District Development effort. With NATO’s International Security Assistance Force (ISAF) focused intently now on proper training and mentoring, the building of Afghan security forces that can protect their own people should accelerate.

Third, life in Afghanistan has actually improved somewhat compared with the recent past. As bad as many security trends have been, for most Afghans the country is far less violent today than it was in the 1980s and 1990s. Actual violence levels are probably worse than official statistics report, as acknowledged by ISAF documents, but they are still roughly comparable to those in Iraq today—meaning violence in Afghanistan

today is ten times less than it was in Iraq before the surge.<sup>18</sup> Of course the situation in Afghanistan is different, and in some ways the Taliban is a smarter foe than was al Qaeda in Iraq—generally avoiding the truck bombings that kill dozens and embitter the population, while spreading its influence more insidiously. Still, it is important to realize that the country is not being ripped apart before our eyes, as Iraq was in the 2004–06 period.

Life in Afghanistan today is better in material terms too. Yes, the progress is uneven, and the poor remain very badly off. But overall the economy, education, health care, and similar indicators are moving more in the right direction than the wrong one. Material progress has contributed to a reservoir of good will among the Afghan people toward those in authority. President Karzai, the United States, and NATO all still enjoyed at least 60 percent support from the population as of summer 2009—far better than the United States has enjoyed in Iraq.<sup>19</sup> This popularity number is fragile, and uneven among different groups, but we do have some advantages in how the Afghan public views the situation nonetheless.

Fourth, NATO in general and the United States in particular know how to carry out counterinsurgency missions better than ever before. Many troops are now knowledgeable about Afghanistan too. We also have excellent commanders, starting with Central Command Combatant Commander General David Petraeus and General McChrystal, who directs both the NATO forces and the separate, U.S.-led counterterrorism force carrying out Operation Enduring Freedom there.<sup>20</sup> Commanders at much lower levels of authority—the ones who execute the strategy day in and day out—are also seasoned. The importance of good leadership in counterinsurgency is very significant, and our strengths in this area are a major asset.<sup>21</sup> Recent progress is increasingly apparent in some places such as Helmand, Wardak, and Logar provinces as a result.

Fifth, much of the basic strategy announced in March 2009 and reaffirmed by President Obama on December 1 is finally right. After seven years of treating Afghanistan as the forgotten war, the United States is seriously resourcing its effort there with combat troops, trainers for Afghan forces, development aid, top-notch leadership, and other capabilities. In mid-2008 the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, said, “Afghanistan has been and remains an economy-of-force campaign, which by definition means we need more forces there.”<sup>22</sup> He was even more blunt in December 2007, when he said, “In

Afghanistan, we do what we can. In Iraq, we do what we must.”<sup>23</sup> On the ground, this reality prevented combined Afghan and NATO forces from securing many districts, towns, and villages. It left troops stalemated in dangerous situations over extended periods of time because they did not have the capacity to seize land and sustain control. It left NATO forces relying too heavily on air strikes with all their potential to cause accidental deaths of innocents (a policy that McChrystal has changed; dangerous air strikes are generally allowed now only if NATO troops are in direct peril).<sup>24</sup> And it left Afghan citizens who cooperate with NATO and their government vulnerable to reprisal.<sup>25</sup> Only in 2009 did these realities finally begin to change.

Historically, only 40 percent of modern counterinsurgencies have succeeded (and somewhat less in the most recent times), according to work by Jason Lyall, Isaiah Wilson, and Ivan Arreguin-Toft. However, 70 percent of the counterinsurgencies that focused on population security have been effective, according to research by Andrew Enterline and Joseph Magagnoli. Given the degree of commitment and excellence of U.S. and other NATO forces today, the odds would seem at least that great in our favor today—provided everyone, including the Afghan government, can work together in support of the basic strategy.<sup>26</sup>

## WHY WE COULD FAIL

For all the promise, Afghanistan could still fail—meaning a return to civil war, or a takeover by extremists and tyrants, some of whom would be allied with al Qaeda. Any such outcome would provide the potential for al Qaeda to reestablish a sanctuary in Afghanistan, meaning that the United States and its allies would fail as well, and their security would be put at greater risk.

Despite its limitations, the Taliban-led insurgency has many strengths. It is well organized, cunningly led, and increasingly confident. Its use of roadside bombs and small-unit ambushes imperils NATO and Afghan troops. It has ample access to weapons and explosives, given the huge stocks of weaponry still scattered throughout the country from previous conflicts, and the numerous smuggling routes across Central Asia.<sup>27</sup> Afghans sense that the insurgency has momentum and are drawn to it for that reason. The Taliban have a shadow government structure, run out of Quetta, Pakistan, by what is famously known as the Quetta *shura*, or leadership group, which maintains a system of governance throughout

key parts of Pashtun-run Afghanistan (primarily the south and east of the country). While the Taliban may be corrupt in their reliance on drug money, they are by most accounts not corrupt in their interactions with normal Afghan citizens, who often comment that the Taliban operate with more discipline, and demand fewer bribes, than do government officials or police forces. The Taliban now operate in more than one-third of Afghanistan's nearly 400 districts. Their chilling use of "night letters," assassinations, and other forms of intimidation sows terror among local leaders as well as the general population, allowing the Taliban to maneuver relatively freely. By avoiding the mass atrocities used against civilian populations by other insurgencies, the Taliban may also have mitigated some of the anger that would otherwise have been directed against them.

This leads directly to the second and related problem: the Taliban's ability to gain supporters among the growing number of Afghans disgusted by the government's incompetence and corruption (and by policy mistakes by the international community). If the government continues to flounder, there could come a day when, for many Afghans, the Taliban seem the lesser of two evils.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, that is already the case for tribes that feel disenfranchised by the Karzai government. Tribes that feel badly served by the current government, and upset by the benefits that rival tribes may enjoy through patronage, are already inclined to support the resistance.<sup>29</sup>

Corruption permeates many Afghan institutions, not least of which is the police force. In the eyes of most Afghans, the police force is a corrupt and distrusted organization. According to one 2009 survey, by Carol Graham and Soumya Chattopadhyay, while 69 percent of Afghans said they trusted the army, only 21 percent trusted the police.<sup>30</sup> That Afghanistan produces 90 percent of the world's opium, and that its farmers have relatively few alternatives to growing poppy reinforces the problem of corruption and lawlessness—many police are drug users themselves and are susceptible to bribes. The drug trade is well organized in Afghanistan now, with twenty-five to thirty key trafficking networks operational, most based in Kandahar.<sup>31</sup> This culture is part of a broader problem of lawlessness; even if the Afghanistan war per se is not as violent as many other conflicts, the frequency of kidnappings, robberies, and other crimes enormously weakens public morale and support for the government.<sup>32</sup> The police must be reformed even as its size is perhaps nearly doubled in the coming years, out of a population with relatively few potential recruits who are literate.

The crime problem is exacerbated by the ever-present risk that key Afghan leaders, in government and out, will be assassinated or driven from the country by fear. In addition to making reform difficult, the loss of leaders is especially worrisome given the country's shortage of experienced leaders and managers after thirty years of war. In the government, in particular, there is often a good minister at the top of a given organization but weak second- and third-tier leadership.<sup>33</sup> The problem is compounded when the country's middle and upper classes give up hope and leave for destinations abroad. This trend has been accelerating in recent years; for example, 18,000 Afghans applied for asylum in Europe in 2008, nearly twice the number as in 2007.<sup>34</sup>

A third central concern is that the international effort is not yet solid. That is true despite the reforms introduced by General McChrystal on the military side of the operation. International aid and development activities remain poorly coordinated. U.S. and NATO troops often clear areas of enemy forces but then must wait long periods before international or Afghan civilian efforts begin in earnest. In addition, international aid organizations often contribute, indirectly and unintentionally, to the culture of corruption by providing contracts to cronies of the current political leadership and thereby indirectly disadvantaging other Afghans, who become angry with prevailing power structures and more supportive of the insurgency as a result. This pattern is common with contracts for construction and related services.

Also troublesome are the CIA's reported payments to President Karzai's brother, Ahmed Wali Karzai, who is widely believed to be involved in drug dealing in southern Afghanistan. Wali Karzai reportedly has helped the CIA work with a local militia group in the area. But the costs outweigh the benefits. The overall effort in the south of Afghanistan has been failing largely because association with such individuals discredits the Afghan government and the international community and thus generates support for the insurgency. In defending such practices, and perhaps attempting to sound realistic and savvy about the ways of the country, one unnamed intelligence source was reported to have said that "if you're looking for Mother Teresa, she doesn't live in Afghanistan." But that comment is naïve in its suggestion that there are no huge consequences to working with such corrupt individuals. Closer to the mark was the comment of Major General Michael Flynn, the top intelligence officer for ISAF, who stated that "the only way to clean up Chicago is to get rid of Capone." The international community has not yet acted on

such advice itself—which puts it in a weak position to demand greater anticorruption efforts from President Karzai.<sup>35</sup>

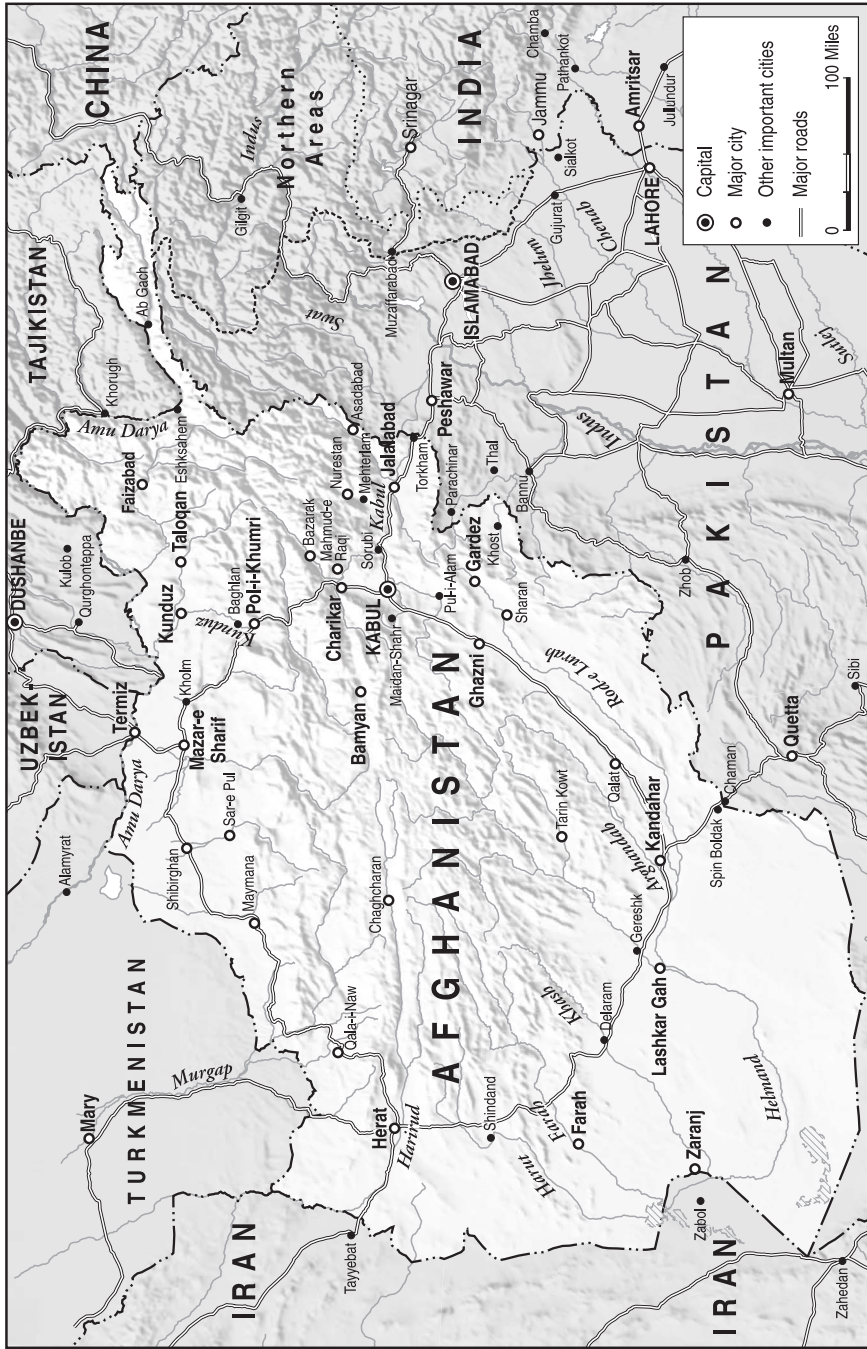
Pakistan poses a fourth major challenge. It has about 25 million Pashtuns, roughly double the number in Afghanistan—a significant number given that the Taliban in particular are a Pashtun-based movement.<sup>36</sup> Pakistan represents a sanctuary for elements of the Afghan insurgency (clustered largely in Quetta, near the border with Afghanistan's Kandahar Province and where the Afghan Taliban is headquartered, and in Peshawar near the Pakistani end of the Khyber Pass, where other militias have their headquarters as well). Particularly in the south of Afghanistan, most resistance fighters are indigenous Afghans. But some fighters do cross the border from Pakistan into Afghanistan to fight, especially in the east of the country. So do weapons. Pakistan's Inter-Services Intelligence Directorate, or ISI, is believed to still support some actions taken by the Taliban and other militias—as for example in the July 7, 2008, suicide bombing of the Indian embassy in Kabul, which killed more than 50.<sup>37</sup> In addition, Pakistan's Frontier Corps is believed to have provided supporting fire from border posts for certain insurgent operations within Afghanistan.<sup>38</sup>

These four major risks on the ground produce in turn a fifth major threat to the mission: a collapse of support for the effort in the Western world and particularly in the United States. We are writing this book largely in the hope of helping to boost support for the counterinsurgency. But if battlefield trends continue as they did into 2009, it will be increasingly hard to sustain support for the effort in the West. The growing sense that the Afghan leadership is working with brutal warlords and corrupt drug dealers, and was willing even to consider stealing a presidential election to remain in power, further undercuts support for the mission. It also casts fundamental doubt on the viability of the mission, because no counterinsurgency effort can succeed without a credible indigenous partner to outside forces. The Karzai government has not been performing up to par. If it continues on its current path, the effort to build a functioning Afghan state that can contain the insurgency increasingly on its own is highly unlikely to succeed. That said, we should also recall that President Karzai has appointed some reformers and good leaders, even if more must be done.

These are all serious problems. But there is encouraging news too. For example, U.S. political support for the mission is likely to continue at some level for a time, even if it is begrudging and gradually weakening.



# Major Roads in Afghanistan





That is because the 9/11 attacks originated from Afghanistan and because President Obama has made the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater the core of his national security strategy. Reform of the Afghan police will be hard. But the Afghan army is showing considerable competence, and even the police are improving when they receive adequate training, mentoring, and partnering. Anticorruption campaigns that target and fire the worst offenders, create stronger offices of inspector general in key parts of government, mount vigorous public information campaigns, and most of all hire credible people for key leadership positions have worked reasonably well from Singapore to Botswana to Uganda to parts of Iraq's government, so we have some models to follow.<sup>39</sup> New economic opportunities can be created with projected improvements in irrigation and transportation systems—systems that NATO and Afghan forces should now have the manpower to protect more effectively. Assassinations and kidnappings are always a worry, and a serious one, but again, the capacity to protect is growing. Pakistan is a real threat in providing (or at least failing to deny) sanctuary for Afghan resistance leaders and allowing weapons as well as Taliban fighters to cross the border. But the government now seems more serious about the threats to its own internal security than before.

Ultimately, perhaps the best way to sum up the situation is to say that the Afghanistan mission is a race against time. Stalemate works to the advantage of the enemy. Not only does it weaken public support in the United States and elsewhere in the Western world, it engenders bitterness on the part of the Afghan people toward NATO forces and their own government. Indeed, in recent years the situation has not been stalemating; it has been worsening. Despite economic progress, the security situation has clearly deteriorated. The addition of 30,000 more American troops in 2009 has led to a certain degree of localized stabilization in parts of the country, but overall trends remain mediocre if somewhat better than before. High-profile issues such as air strikes that cause civilian fatalities have also had huge and disproportionate resonance throughout Afghanistan and sparked anger against those carrying them out; as Admiral Mullen said after one such tragic incident in May of 2009, "We can't keep going through incidents like this and expect the strategy to work."<sup>40</sup> Improvements are already happening on the ground. But success is not preordained, and we could still lose.