



SMALL WARS JOURNAL

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A Third Way in Afghanistan

Gary Anderson

When Ralph Peters of the *New York Post* and the editor of the *New York Times* actually agree on something, it is both an unusual occasion and a cause for reflection. In the case of Hamid Karzai, the leader of Afghanistan, we have one of those rare confluences of agreement. Both concur that Karzai has become more of a liability than an asset. His poorly thought out threat to throw in his lot with Taliban in response to Western disapproval, combined with his inept handling of the war, has lost him critical support in Washington and in Europe. Some Afghans think he may have lost his grip on reality; whatever the cause, he has made few friends in recent weeks among those he needs if he hopes to retain power. None of this bodes well for American strategy in Afghanistan. It is one thing to have an unstable ally in a war; we have dealt with shaky allies in the past. However, an ungrateful *and* unstable ally may well be too much to ask the American people to bear. It may be time to explore a third option between abandoning Afghanistan and enduring Karzai's ungrateful and demonstrably corrupt regime.

As we capture and rebuild places such as Marjah and Kandahar we will have to train and nurture competent civil administrators and judges if we are ever to totally pacify those areas and rid them of Taliban influence. We will also have to build competent local security forces using fighters who have been lured from the ranks of the Taliban. We need to succeed in these efforts despite a lack of effective support from Karzai's government. Perhaps it is time to see these effective and reasonably honest home grown mechanisms as antibodies to fight the infection of corruption and incompetence that is eating the Kabul government like a cancer from within.

To work, our counterinsurgency strategy must spread like a series of ink blots until places such as Marjah and Kandahar join together as a nationwide sea of ink that eventually drowns the Taliban. Perhaps it is time to envision that sea as overwhelming Karzai and his loose alliance of corrupt warlords as well.

There is a harsh reality here. We Americans have done better at supporting insurgencies in Afghanistan than we have in building a competent government in Kabul. We helped eject the Soviets, but we created Karzai. Maybe it is time to support a legitimate civil opposition complete with its own combat power so that it cannot be intimidated by the militias of Karzai's warlord allies, or the Taliban.

Faced by a loose coalition of relatively competent local government officials and their own self sufficient security forces Karzai would have two choices. First, he could try to crack down on them. Without our support, he would fail. In the end, he would become what, in reality, he is

today; that being the mayor of metropolitan Kabul. A second option would be to undertake real reform in order to survive and that is what we have been asking from him all along.

Our clear-hold-build approach to counterinsurgency dictates the creation of relatively honest and competent local administrators, police, and judges. The ability to provide these things in the areas that they control has been a key to the Taliban resurgence in Afghanistan. What the Taliban have lacked in competence they have attempted to make up for with diligence. Compared to what the Karzai government has provided in the areas that we have won for them the Taliban have looked pretty good. Perhaps it is time for us to appear to be anti-establishment as well.

In Iraq, we helped to create and support the Sons of Iraq (SOI) units as a non-state actors designed to become a loose grouping of anti-bodies to counter the hated Al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). This was a desperation move born out of desperate times. The Shiia led Iraqi government in Baghdad never liked this approach, but they had no alternative as they had proved incapable of dealing with AQI as it existed in 2006-7. As a result of government disapproval of the SOI movement we never created a corresponding political movement to complement the SOI fearing that we would merely be creating another political party replete with a militia.

The Sunni population, which provided the bulk of the SOI, politically self organized anyway; this surprised everyone. They formed an alliance with secular Shiia under Ayad Allawi and helped win an election last month. Unlike the Iraqi government, Karzai has not shown an inclination to rein in malign warlords and their militias. Consequently, there is no expectation that he would act against any benign militias that we might create.

Assuming for a moment that Karzai makes good on his threat to run off and join the Taliban, we should ask ourselves what the impact would be. Assuming that the Taliban do not shoot him out of hand, they would then be stuck with him. That would be their problem, not ours. The Afghans could elect another leader and it might well be from one of our ink blots. We could continue to expand the blots and hope that the new generation of competent leaders would eventually overwhelm both the Taliban and the warlords as well.

So far, we have tried to solve Afghanistan from the top down. It hasn't worked. A bottom-up solution is worth a try.

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