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In Afghanistan, Less is More

by David Malet

Two recent developments have brought optimism to some Afghanistan-watchers. The first is the appointment of General David Petraeus as commander of the United States Forces. Petraeus is credited as the architect of the Surge of troops that brought greater levels of stability to Iraq in 2007 when all had seemed lost there, and the hope is that he can cause lightning to strike twice. The second is an anti-Taliban uprising in the Gizab district that perhaps signals a newfound willingness by even Pashtun tribesmen, the Afghan demographic most closely tied to the Taliban, to turn against it and ally with the United States. *The Washington Post* quoted American officials as claiming the Gizab revolt as "the most important thing that has happened in southern Afghanistan this year" and heralding a "breakthrough" if only the patterns of involvement by local tribesmen could be discerned.

The rise of the Gizab Good Guys indeed provides a salutary lesson, particularly because it reinforces what has been witnessed in Iraq without being widely understood. Improved conditions in Iraq coincided with the Surge but were not primarily caused by it. What changed was that Sunni tribes in Anbar province, who had been the strongest supporters of the Islamist insurgents, turned against them and partnered with the United States in a development known as the Anbar Awakening. The similarity between the Anbar Awakening and the Gizab Good Guys is more than just alliterative. In both cases, private disputes over family honor involving women and money drove a wedge between the insurgents from the population, separating the fish from the water in Mao's formulation of guerilla warfare.

The key factor at work is identity. The failure of an effective national government to consolidate power in a deeply divided society means that appeals to defend Afghanistan against insurgents will be ineffective – being an Afghan citizen does not guarantee security, prosperity, or a meaningful social context. The fact that the Taliban has foreign fighters among its ranks means little either – weak Afghan identity falls before the greater salience of being a Muslim, an identity shared with the Taliban and not with foreign forces. What we have seen in Gizab and Anbar is that outsiders threatening the integrity of social identities that are relevant because they do provide security and fellowship does provoke a fight – one that is tribal rather than patriotic.

This matters because crunch time has arrived for the war that has been underway since October 2001, now the longest in the history of the United States. The necessity of finally finding a way out of the quagmire has not been imposed by any significant changes in the course of the counter-insurgency against the Taliban. Instead, the pressure for resolution emanates from the campaign hustings. It is less than one year from the beginning of the scheduled draw-down of American troops ahead of the 2012 presidential primary season. Additionally, at a conference in Kabul in July, representatives of seventy nations participating in the peacekeeping and reconstruction efforts set a five year deadline for the final withdrawal of all foreign troops. We are now past the point of debating the appropriate role of the international community in Afghanistan. The only question remaining is the same one that has gone unanswered since

Mullah Omar and Osama bin Laden went into hiding: How can Afghanistan become a stable post-conflict society?

Critics of United States policy in South Asia are fond of noting Afghanistan's sobriquet of "the graveyard of empires" because of its penchant for exhausting occupying powers. The modern borders of the country were set as a neutral zone between the expanding Russian and British empires, an ungovernable mountainous terrain littered with equally ungovernable tribes. In the 1970s, the Soviets were drawn into what they believed would be a brief and simple military intervention to shore up a communist puppet state, one that had become deeply unpopular thanks to its efforts to create a modern society, which included breaking the power of tribal warlords and religious leaders, and mandating that all women receive an education. After the Soviets withdrew, fighting between the warlords for control over the central government grew so horrendous that the Taliban, who promised to provide order and social justice, were an attractive alternative to the chaos.

A country that rarely, if ever, had effective central authority and has now undergone more than three decades of continuous war is being asked by the outside world to deliver a twenty-first century state. It is being asked to provide a functional civil society for a diverse population of ethnic groups with different languages while simultaneously fending off heavily armed criminals and terrorists. The West has made it clear that it lacks any confidence in the feckless and corrupt government of President Hamid Karzai, but there is no viable alternative available. At the same time, both Presidents Bush and Obama have made clear that the United States cannot allow an ungoverned staging ground for militant Islamist groups to launch international terrorist attacks. What is to be done?

In Afghanistan, as in Iraq, the solution lies in abandoning the pretense that every piece of territory with boundaries drawn by colonial powers is a nation. Much of the post-colonial developing world suffers from weak and corrupt central governments that control little more than the capital city. But the international community, mindful of 9/11, is unable to accept this status for Afghanistan. It must therefore accept that governance, and willing partners, must be found at the sub-national level, among the tribes, rather than in distant and disconnected Kabul. Shifting resources to build security and economic development at the local level and obviate the Karzai regime is not a perfect solution, but for Afghanistan the clock is ticking.

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